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# C&G

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# WORLD TORN ASUNDER

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2010'S BEST GAMES
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A MATTER OF CHARACTER
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REVIEWS

# C&G MONTHLY

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# THIS IS A GAMER

## GEEKS. NERDS. DORKS. L33T. N00BS. OTAKUS. GAMERS.

MATTHEW O'MARA

Watching a few episodes of Attack of the Show gave me a chance to reflect upon the gamer identity. The show comes off as being so patronizingly sarcastic even details like the show's canned laughter irked me. *AOTS* tells us what we are: 20-year-old white males who laugh at boob jokes and salivate as Olivia Munn eats a hotdog. Is that how the mass media views the gamer demographic? Should we let ourselves be defined by them? Do we have to take this as gamers?

So many questions arise when you think about the essence of a gamer. Who are we? Are we united? Are we culturally defined? Is there a gamer ideology? Are males and females seen as equals? Are we political? Are we being listened to? Do we have agency within society? Are we a threat to the social order? Can we affect change in the world? Working as a video game journalist and having met a number of game developers, players and personalities, I can tell you we are a diverse group. We are so diverse that any label, any misconceived stereotype should have a tough time sticking. Why then are gamer stereotypes so prevalent?

Attack of the Show is not the culture that I know. These are not the gamers I've grown up with. This is not the experience I've had. Everything presented to the viewer comes from a misconceived stereotype about the kind of person who would play a video game. The immature content of the show reflects the immature audience they are targeting. It becomes such a patronizingly, sexualized, mind-numbing experience that it's no wonder so many people believe video gaming have such a negative influence over children and youths. An adult experience is different than a mature experience, and this difference comes from the influence of the gamer that I know.

We are game developers trying to pay the rent. We are community organizers developing social links throughout Toronto. We are secret Street Fighters able to destroy opponents in seconds. We are people who feel too old to play video games. We are people too young to buy Mature ESRB rated titles. We are journalists and writers trying to make our living through our words. We are men and women who have played video games all of our lives. And we are one of the largest yet least recognized demographics in the world. The media sees us as a violent, murder obsessed group enamoured by the glories of warfare and death. There is a soldier in all of us, isn't there? No, there is not a soldier in all of us.

The question remains: what the hell are we?

This is a question of what we are perceived to be and not a question of what we are. What we are, in my opinion, is ineffable. There are so many of us that a collective identity is impossible to imagine. A few have tried, but ultimately failed. PS3 spokesman, Kevin Butler, at E3 said we are united by a ridiculous obsession with gaming. He rallied viewers under the banner of the god of gaming, saying that we are all equals, while promoting a device targeted specifically to the casual market. Microsoft claims that we are gamers who are in total control of our experiences. The Kinect allows full body control of the gaming experience, but we are placed under scrutiny by conditions of the device's privacy regulations. The eye of Big Brother is always watching. Development studios like Square Enix believe that the West is a macho-obsessed market who wants strong protagonists, busty females and little in the way of character development in their games. Namco, another Japanese developer, recently scrapped efforts to appeal to the Western demographic. They stated that we were impossible to please even after they attempted to appeal to our macho ways.

Adult, teen, youth, child, man, woman, boy, girl; gamers. We are all placed under ill conceived categories by the various companies that facilitate our play. We are willing to stand under them for shelter, but no one believes that they will last. The gamer identity is ambiguous, and this ambiguity can lead to disasters, especially when certain groups are corralled and others are left out in the rain.

Team Ninja's handling of the Metroid series destroyed Samus Aran, a female hero valued for her strength of character. She was once viewed as a role model because of her strengths and because of her departure from the blatant sexualization seen in many other female protagonists. Team Ninja took away her suit, they took away her power and they left her defenceless unable to fend for herself. They literally stripped Samus of all of the great things about her character in the belief that it would appeal to the main demographic of gamers, adolescent teen boys. They essentially alienated one half of the world's population by destroying Samus Aran.

Gamers are male and female, men and women, equal in all ways. Gamers are of all races and cultures, religions and beliefs, yet we see a targeted focus in marketing and the nature of game development. This gamer banner under which some of us stand has been falsely generated by marketing groups and misconceptions; and no one has a strong enough voice to combat it when confronted. The gamer identity has been solidified in the form of a 20-year-old male sitting

WORLD OF WARCRAFT • 12 MILLION PLAYERS WORLDWIDE

by a large television. That is not the gamer that I know.

Attack of the Show was merely the catalyst for the expulsion of a year's worth of pent-up rage over this identity crisis. Gamers seem unable to decide what they really want to be. Do they want to have their video games recognized as an art form? Do they want to simply play games for their entertainment value? Do we care what people think of us? Is the "gamer identity" something real?

Escapist Magazine's feature Extra Credits has an amazing video series on diversity in games. They believe that if we are to escape from this stereotype, we and development studios must be willing to set ourselves apart. They say that if gamers demand more mature content they will ultimately receive games that are more intellectual and able to articulate mature themes to audiences, yet it's never that simple.

Roland Barthes, a French post-structuralist, wrote, "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination." The subjective response of the audience is held, in many forms of literary criticism, as the most important aspect of any successful piece of writing. Many literary critics view the reader as the ultimate end. They believe that the reader should have the final say in all analysis and criticism of a work. With the birth of the reader comes the death of the author, so too does the birth of the gamer signal the death of the video game author.

Barthes then writes, "Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the text is constituted." Like the reader, the gamer is a medium through which the video game experience interacts with the real world. We are a diverse group each individually having their own tastes and preferd genres which they enjoy to play. Once we enter into a virtual realm we lose our agency to the video game author-God, yet it is our presence that brings a video game experience together. At once we have complete agency over the virtual experience, yet we are also being controlled by it. The gamer is perceived to be an audience not an active participant.

This is a systemic problem faced by the gamer. Taste differs so wildly in aesthetics, game play and narrative, that no single game can make everyone happy. Gamers are everyone and no one. The gamer identity has become such a confluence of people that we suffer from it. The gamer label becomes placeless, an unknown force controlled not by the individuals that make up gamers as a whole, but by the authors and developers whose content defines them. We have no concrete identity, so we look to others to find definition.

Spending so much time talking to developers and gamers alike, I've witnessed the extreme diversity in video game culture. Geeks. Nerds. Dorks. L33T. N00B. Otakus. Gamers. There are so many of us out there, yet we all go by our own labels. Diversity, it seems, is more what divides rather than what unites our collective identity. Gamers have an identity crisis, but it's a healthy illness. No art form, literary style or aesthetic can pinpoint a single archetype they can collectively identify with. Gamers are driving force behind an entire culture of their own, whether it's an experience shared between friends or one played on a solitary screen.

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GENUINE CANADIAN MAGAZINE

# SHOP SPOTLIGHT

## HEROES WORLD

MIA HERRERA

If you were to enter Heroes World on any given day, you'd likely find a scattered group of people bonding over the latest comic releases or recently ordered board games. Somewhere behind the counter you'll find Andre or Jon (most often both), manning the cash register and debating their latest favourites with customers. Although entering an independent hobby store can often be intimidating to a newcomer, the atmosphere at Heroes World is relaxed and welcoming.

As a Markham resident, my comics and gaming passion is often fuelled by Heroes World – the one place in Markham selling comic singles or the more difficult to find board games. That being said, it is my pleasure to feature Heroes World this month: a small shop that makes a big difference.

**Pursuing a Passion**

Nine years ago, Andre Greenidge and Jon Ho were fresh out of school and planning their next steps in life. Though law school was the next step for Andre and a computer job was the next step for Jon, both were attracted to the idea of starting a comic book store of their own after working together at other indie comic shops. The result was Heroes World, which opened in 2001.

Initially, Heroes World mainly sold comic books with the occasional Monopoly or Scrabble game stocked during the holiday season. Upon opening, however, Jon and Andre made sure to closely observe and adapt to their clientele and the shifts in their industry. The two accepted special game and comic requests, and ordered other products they thought their customers would enjoy based on these preferences. As a result, Heroes World gradually made the shift from a comic store to a full blown comics and hobby games shop. Currently Heroes World is nestled in the suburban heart of Markham, Ontario with a loyal customer base and a large shop on the corner of Warden Road and Highway 7.

**A Personal Touch**

When speaking with *C&G Monthly*, Andre reflected on the evolution of his store, saying, "More and more stores are closing these days, but I think the reason why we're still here is because we keep a close eye on our products and foster a sense of community."

Heroes World has certainly become a notable part of the Markham community. Their busiest day is Wednesday, when new comics are released, but every day in Heroes World boasts a bustling clientele. In addition to offering registered Wizards' Friday Night Magic Games, Heroes World also hosts Dungeons and Dragons tournaments and regular game nights to introduce customers to new and old favourites.

Heroes World is run with so much heart and verve that it feels more like a clubhouse than a shop. Andre and Jon leave their doors wide open to novice and experienced gamers and readers alike, never discriminating between the everyday client and the once-a-month visitor. Rather than focusing on the hard sell of the day, both aim to foster an appreciation for comics and games in each of their customers, discussing each visitor's likes and dislikes to find the best comic or game fit. Jon and Andre even offer their customers their own games to play with so customers can really get a feel of what they are playing before making any decisions.

**Preparing for the Future**

Despite how much time and energy store owners invest in their shops, it is impossible to deny that the rise of the digital era makes it increasingly difficult for indie stores to stay open.

Andre expressed his concern over the fact that more and more indie stores are closing, saying, "It's definitely worrisome, especially for stores like ours that sell comic singles. These days publishers are producing trade copies of comic books almost immediately after the singles come out. When I was younger, you wouldn't know if a trade would be coming out or not, so you would always make an effort to keep up with the story. You wouldn't want to miss an issue. Nowadays, almost every series is placed into trade immediately after singles' print and these trades are sold in big bookstores like Chapters or Indigo. In addition to that, with advanced eReaders like the iPad coming out, we really have to consider how business will be affected. Things will definitely change over the next five years, and to combat that I think we have to create more of a community for our comic book fans. We've done it with our gamers, but we'll definitely have to make ourselves an essential part of the comic book reading experience if we want to survive."

If a tight-knit community is needed for Heroes World to continue thriving, then Jon and Andre have had a great head start. Wednesdays especially reveals Markham's involved comic book community as people visit in pairs or on their own and are quickly engaged by Heroes World staff to speak with others about their comic preferences. A quick visit can easily turned into a longer pow wow. Complimentary to in-store interaction, the Heroes World website also builds and fosters the in-store community, offering a forum for people to post about their latest finds or campaigns and keeping customers in touch with the staff.

As Justin Elliot, one of the Heroes World customer service representatives, said, "a comic book shop is not selling you a comic book, it is selling you a place to talk about it." This remains true in Heroes World and many other indie stores. Indie shops are not necessarily about buying the product; it's about the fact that stepping into the shop brings you into a place where you belong.

Heroes World is one of many independent gaming and comic stores in our communities that foster the industry we love. They are an important link in the chain of what we do, cultivating new, lifelong fans for the hobby.

As we enter the digital era of online gaming, reading, and purchasing, it becomes more common to see these shops closing one by one. As impassioned gamers and readers alike, however, next time you pass by an indie shop, make sure to drop in and say hi. You might have just entered your new favourite hang out spot.

# 2010 IN RETROSPECT

## LOOKING BACK AT SUPERHERO COMICS

CHRIS MACHEROSKOS

A new year is upon us, which also means another one is in the can. Looking back at 2010, I think the best word to describe the world of superhero comics is *epic*. We got to witness great storylines, exciting events, captivating moments, milestones reached, and new eras being ushered in for the future. I thought it would be fun to retrospect one last time before we turn our attention to what 2011 has in store for us.

This past year hit the ground running as certain events from as far back as 2004 were reaching their breaking points. Both comic book giants, Marvel and DC, were working on concluding long-term stories involving all of their big guns. Superman, Spider-Man, Batman, the X-Men, Green Lantern, and the Avengers were all in stories that were set in motion years ago with the intention of all of them culminating in 2010.

Marvel brought to a close a story that began in 2004 with the disbanding of the Avengers in *Avengers: Disassembled*. The architect behind breaking the legendary group up several years ago, Brian Michaels Bendis, revealed that his intention was to always bring the team back together. He got the chance to do just that in Marvel's 2010 big crossover event *Siege*. Norman Osborn took it upon himself to invade Asgard, Thor's home. This attack brought nearly every superhero in America together, with Captain America, Iron Man, and Thor leading the charge.

After foiling Norman's scheme and defeating the invaders, the superheroes realize that the people need a group like the Avengers. Since dissolving, the world had fallen on dark times, which explains how a known madman like Osborn (formerly the psychotic Green Goblin) would become America's top superhero, albeit through lies and deceit. The return of the Avengers brought about a new era in the Marvel Comics Universe, one that is dubbed *The Heroic Age*. Many books changed their status quo in concurrence with this new direction. Whereas in the last few years, the lines between good and evil were blurred, now we had a more clear idea of who were the good guys and who weren't.

In true competitive fashion, DC Comics would not be outdone by their rivals. Back in 2005, critically acclaimed writer Geoff Johns took on the revival of Green Lantern. He set in motion a storyline that began with *Green Lantern: Rebirth*, followed a few years later by *The Sinestro Corps War*, and the final piece of the trilogy began in 2009, which carried well over into 2010, *Blackest Night*. This major crossover event is arguably the storyline of the year in most fans' eyes.

The Black Lantern Corps, led by Nekron, begin to revive the dead in order to bring chaos in an attempt to fill the universe in darkness. The entire superhero community stands together against these embodiments of death. Enemies stood side by side as they battled this common threat. The war ended when Hal Jordan became a White Lantern, containing the ring-power of life, the only counter to death, defeat Nekron, and brought an end to *Blackest Night*.

Directly following this event is *Brightest Day*. After being victorious, the DC Universe is headed into a brighter future, or as bright as a superhero's life can be. While everyone is affected by this change, *Brightest Day* is mainly focused on twelve deceased characters that were brought back as a result of *Blackest Night*. This dozen is offered an opportunity at fully returning to life if they succeed in personal missions they are set on. *Brightest Day* is still going on and carries things over into 2011 for DC Comics.

Aside from the big company crossovers, these heroes were faced with personal perils as well as worldwide dangers. Peter Parker's life is definitely no picnic. To make matters worse, many of his classic enemies returned to his life once again. He clashed with the likes of Electro, Sandman, Rhino, Mysterio, and Lizard among others in *The Gauntlet*. All of these battles led him straight into *The Grim Hunt*, where Spider-Man goes against the resurrection of his long dead foe/friend, Kraven the Hunter and his family.

A common theme in superhero comics these days is the return of the dead, as you have obviously gathered from some of the stories I already touched on. Batman was no exception to this. But we must credit writer Grant Morrison for doing it in unique fashion. In 2008's event *Final Crisis*, Bruce Wayne was apparently killed. The truth is he was sent back in time with no memory of who he is.

In *The Return of Bruce Wayne*, the original Batman traveled through various periods of history. This was a six-issue mini-series, with each issue placing Bruce in a different era like the Late-Paleolithic, the pilgrimage of Gotham Village, and the Wild West. In these adventures, Bruce proves that he is truly the *World's Greatest Detective* as he places clues to help him find himself throughout history. In the end, he successfully returns to present day Gotham City where he launches an organization he calls Batman Incorporated. Instead of exclusively helping the citizens of Gotham, Bruce plans to expand internationally where a different Batman is stationed in various cities across the world. This new direction is surely a contrast to what we are used to with the Dark Knight, who always preferred to work alone in the shadows.

Meanwhile, Superman was busy trying to keep both his worlds from destroying each other in *The Last Stand of New Krypton* and *War of the Supermen*. He battled his greatest foes in Brainiac, General Zod, and of course Lex Luthor in hopes of keeping the humans and the Kryptonians from annihilating each other.

The X-Men were preparing for the return of Hope Summers. She is the first mutant born since 2005's *House of M*. This leads many to believe that she is the mutant race's salvation. After time-travelling with Cable, she returns to the present day in *Second Coming*, which launches a new era in the mutant world.

The Hulk, along with the various versions of the jolly-green giant, was fighting to survive in *Fall of the Hulks* and *World War Hulks*. By the end of these stories, Bruce Banner once again becomes the Hulk after being unable to for a long while. We also learned the identities of the mysterious Red Hulk and Red She-Hulk, who were Banner's arch-rival General Ross and Banner's former wife Betty Ross, respectively.

Daredevil went from The Man Without Fear to the Man To Fear in *Shadowland*. This event focused on the more street-level heroes like Luke Cage, Iron First, Moon Knight, and Spider-Man. The blind superhero slowly evolved into a villain, causing some of his best friends to unite and fight against him.

Aside from the countless stories and events, 2010 also saw some of the more iconic superheroes reach milestones. Both Marvel and DC were celebrating landmark issues. Titles like *Batman* and *Superman* both reached #700 this past year. *Wonder Woman*, highlighting the adventures of the Amazon Princess, made it to #600, joining the likes of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Thor* and *Captain America*, who all reached that plateau the previous year. These accomplishments are a testament to the everlasting and timeless impact these characters have had over the decades and continue to have to this day. This new year has some milestones on the horizon as well.

It was a very hectic year for superheroes. Readers were bombarded with stories and events during 2010. It might have been a little overwhelming, but there is no doubt that it was the most important year in the last decade. It brought concepts years in the making to a close while launching new ones that will lead us into the years to follow. There aren't any signs of slowing down. Frankly, I don't see a reason why they would. We might be sitting here a year from now looking back at 2011 and saying how monumental it was. But when I think of 2010 in the world of superhero comics, I will immediately think *EPIC*.

# RETRO CORNER

## TURBO 16 GRAFX

Perhaps a day late and certainly not a dollar short, the TurboGrafx-16 was a console doomed to failure from the very day it landed in the North American market. This interesting little system may never had stood a chance but it may have something to offer to the modern retro gamer.

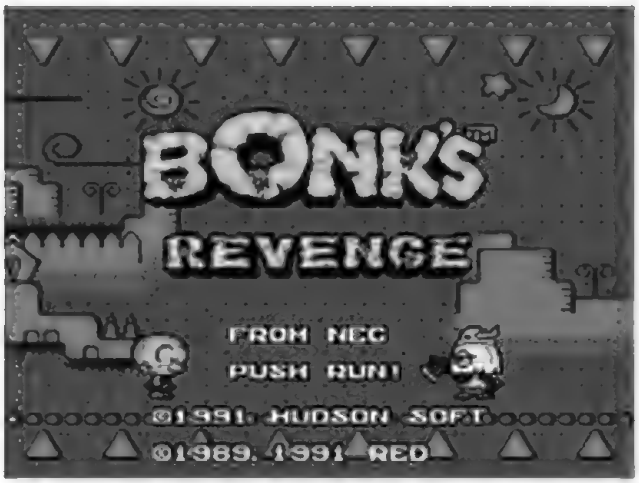
Born of Japanese tech giant NEC and Hudsonsoft's desire to enter in to what Nintendo had proven to the lucrative market of home gaming hardware, the TurboGrafx-16 is recognized today as being the very first entrant in to the fourth generation of home consoles. At the time of its release in 1987 the PC Engine, as it was known in Japan, was a major technological leap beyond the hardware then being offered by the industry leading Nintendo Entertainment System. The new system was, at least on paper, in every way superior to anything that had come before it. With four times the working ram, a colour pallet over ten times as broad as that of the NES and nearly eight times that of the Sega Master System, it provided a gaming experience the likes of which the console gaming community had never seen before. Naturally, response from Japanese gamers was huge. In short order

> "With the system's fantastic success in Japan it was only a matter of time before NEC set it's sights on the increasingly lucrative North American market."

the new system had begun not just to pose the threat to Nintendo's dominance that the Master System never could, but to actually take the lead in the Japanese console wars.

With the system's fantastic success in Japan it was only a matter of time before NEC set its sights on the increasingly lucrative North American market. Backed by its impressive, and growing, library of Japanese games and its obvious technical superiority to the now aging NES it seemed like nothing could go wrong. It seemed as though the TurboGrafx-16 appeared poised to sweep North America the same way it was sweeping Japan. Appearances, however, can be deceiving.

By the time NEC had announced its plans to bring the TurboGrafx-16 overseas Sega had also made public its intentions to release the Genesis in North America. While the Genesis was technically superior and retailed at a lower price point, at the time this may not have seemed as great a threat as it might to the executives at NEC as the Genesis had failed to truly mount any opposition to the TG16 in Japan. Having been released a year after NEC's next-gen console the Genesis found it' self dropped in to a Japanese market that had already made its choice between the TurboGrafx and NES. Gamers who had been looking to update had done so already only a year




before. In North America however, the story would be different as the two consoles would be forced to compete shoulder to shoulder with only a two week gap between release dates. Both companies released aggressive marketing campaigns in order to capture the hearts and minds of North American gamers. At first, sales for both systems were promising. For a brief time, it even looked like the TubroGrafx-16 would be competitive.

While NEC's sales in Japan had enjoyed the cushion provided by the technical superiority of the TG16 over its peers at the time of its release, as previously stated the same was not true of its launch in North America. The Genesis had several key technical advantages over the base TurboGrafx-16 console, such as the 16-bit architecture of its main CPU compared to the TurboGrafx-16's 8-bit CPU and the Genesis's 64k of work RAM over the TG's 8. Beyond these architectual differences the Genesis also offered gamers a more modern looking ergonomic controller and a second controller port to allow for out of the box multi-play. Ironically, the one massive technical advantage the TurboGrafx-16 boasted over Sega's new console was widely unavailable to North American gamers. While the release of the TurboGrafx-CD add-on had done much to prevent the upstart Genesis from gaining a foothold in Japan, the peripheral was more than a little difficult to find in North American stores. Even for those capable of finding the system, many found the four hundred dollar price tag prohibitive. To put that number in to perspective, four hundred dollars at the time of the TurboGrafx-CD's release in North America is roughly equivalent to six hundred eighty dollars today, based on the rate of inflation. A huge price to pay for any piece of add-on hardware.

As time drew on matters only grew worse for NEC's attempts to take control of the gaming market. Attitudes on the TurboGrafx-16 had shifted, with many gamers choosing to ignore the 16-bit graphic chip set (that allowed the TG to call itsself a 16-Bit system) in light of its 8-Bit main processor. Viewing it perhaps more as an advancement on the 8-Bit era than a true contender in the 16, it was also not long before Sega had announced plans for its own CD based attachment. To top off Nintendo, was engaging in unfair licensing policies (official and unofficial) that prevented any game that had been released for the NES from being released on any other system. Sega had a history as a maker of its own arcade titles and Master System games to draw upon, NEC did not. Despite attempts to market an new all in one TG-16 and TG-CD system, the Turbo Duo, NEC had already lost the war. The eventual release of Nintendo's SNES console was the final nail in the Turbo's coffin as the system slipped back to fourth in the American market, behind even the NES that it had trounced in Japan.

With a relatively small North American install base and stalling sales, few North American developers showed much interest in the system. As a result, North American releases seemed too few and far between, a death sentence for any console. Quietly, the once promising console began to fade in to the shadows. It would only be a matter of time before official North American support for the console was pulled.

Today, we're left to examine what all this means to the the modern retro gamer. The answer to that is a little bit simpler; not a damned thing. Regardless of how the system performed or failed to perform on the market here in North America twenty years ago, regardless of whether its truly a 16-Bit system or not, the TurboGrafx-16 a fantastic choice, if not a must have for anyone who enjoys a good old fashioned retro romp. Although the system may have suffered badly from Nintendo's illegal domination of the U.S. software market, the ability to use a small adapter to play the HuCard based games for the base system and the complete lack of region lock on the CD based games gives todays gamer total freedom to choose the best from both the U.S. and more abundant Japanese releases. A number of these releases, not available on any other system, are truly fantastic and original games.

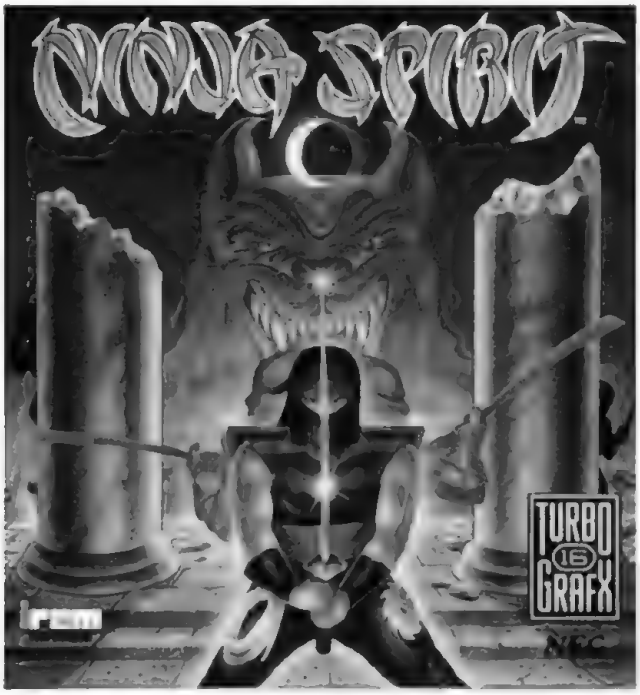
Its hard to turn your back on any console with games like Gekisha Boy, in which the gamer plays a budding young photographer out on a mission to capture to most interesting photos from eight different environments. The game is just so bizarre it demands playing. While you roam the streets you will encounter aliens, *Spider-Man*, plane crashes, *Michael Jackson*, children blasting themselves in to space.

"Even aside from it's impressive list of games, the system stands as an important part of gaming history."

All the while you have to use the photo cross-air to capture these events and still manage to dodge all of the objects and enemies that will cause you to drop some of your limited supply of film. Oddly, you can also interact with a surprising amount of your environment, using the camera to cause windows to open or items to fall. Between the sheer entertainment value of the game and its punishing difficulty, you'll find yourself playing it over and over again for hours. Its very nearly worth buying a TG-16 for this game alone.

Aside from the bizarre, the system holds something original for fans of just about any genre of gaming. For the action RPG fans its home to the first four titles from the legendary *Ys* series, these four titles provide a range of gameplay due to the ever changing nature of the early Ys games and an excellent gameplay experience for anyone growing a little tired of the original *Zelda*. There were also a broad range of interesting shmups and side-scrolling shooters available for the system. Games like *Blazing Lazers* and *Gates of Thunder* actually go a long way to close a bit of the gap between TG-16 titles and early Genesis and SNES releases. The more simplistic style of play worked to the system's strengths, graphics and music, making great use of the system's graphic processor while not horribly overtaxing the 8-Bit CPU or limited amount of RAM.

Another genre the system did quite well side scrolling action and platforming games. While many of them may have played slightly more like a updated and reworked NES title than something like *Sonic The Hedgehog* or *Donkey Kong Country*, there is a great amount of variety in the sidescrollers on the TG-16. *The Bonk series*, *Ninja Spirit* and *Samurai Ghost* are excellent examples of how fun a good old fashioned side scroller could be. Even if they aren't your cup of tea, however, the system still offered a few highly innovative titles, such as *Dracula X* to which *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* was a direct sequel.



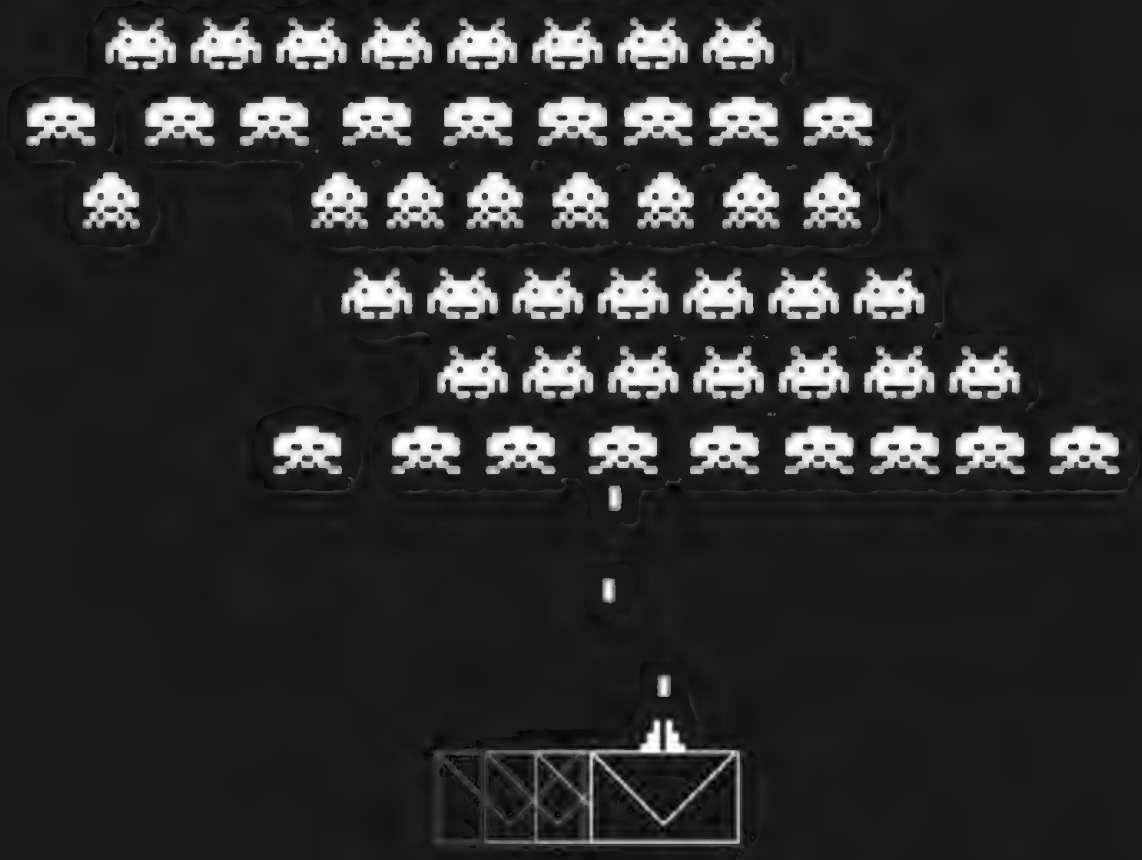

Even aside from its impressive list of games, the system stands as an important part of gaming history. Its ironic that the system encountered so many marketing issues with its North American release surrounding its more transitional nature, being seen as a system that fell between the 8 and 16-Bit era in light of its incredibly important role as a transition between conventional cartridge (or in this case card) based gaming and CD gaming. Although we in North America often casually think of the Sega CD as being the first CD based system, this is not the case. The TurboGrafx-CD beat the Sega CD to market by three years, in fact a very strong argument can be made that the Sega CD was developed to allow the Genesis to compete with the TG-16 on the Japanese market. While you may not think that forcing Sega in to releasing an unpopular system add on is something that greatly effected the gaming landscape, you need to consider Nintendo's reaction to the entirety of its Japanese competition boasting their new fangled CD technology. Enter the SNES-CD, while we won't get in to the nitty gritty details of the SNES-CD, the unreleased system was Nintendo's original plan to become involved in the world of CD gaming. The SNES-CD was to be made by Sony and like the Turbo Duo would play both SNES cartridges and CD based games. Ultimately, Nintendo reneged on the deal and left a furious Sony holding the bag... and the unreleased console. When it became clear that partnership with Nintendo was not in the cards, Sony decided to rework the system and release it on its own, under its own badging, calling it the Sony Playstation.

Its true that CD gaming was an inevitability, other developers had even tried their hand at it, but NEC and Hudson's joint venture in the TurboGrafx-16 and TurboGrafx-CD proved to the gaming community in general that CD based gaming could be a success. Their successful work on the fledgling technology pushed the concept to the forefront of the Japanese gaming industry and pushed the advancement of the technology years ahead of where it would have otherwise been and opened a door to what has become one of the biggest manufacturers of video game hardware in the world.

Not a bad legacy for a little console half of North American gamers today may have never heard of.

In the end the point is, regardless of how much or how little market share the TurboGrafx-16 may have managed to capture, its still a fun system. A system flush with great games and interesting history. It exists as a little piece of the gaming world that some of us may just have missed. Do yourself a favour, check it out.

# MAIL SHOULDN'T BE THIS TOUGH



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# COMPRESSED CONFLICT

## GRAPHICAL WARFARE ON THE iPHONE

JUSTIN AMIRKHANI

Before *Halo* and *Call of Duty*, before *Half-Life* and *Goldeneye* there was *Doom*, *Quake*, and *Wolfenstein 3D*. id Software made a name for themselves by defining an entirely new genre of game, the first-person shooter. Taking elements from classic vector-based combat games like *Battlezone* and injecting it with some incredibly advanced (for the time) technical work, legendary programmers John Carmack and John Romero defined modern gaming.

It wasn't long before challengers arose though. Before id's first decade was through, Mark Rein and Tim Sweeny released *Unreal* as the flagship title for Epic Games' new Unreal Engine. The engine gave developers easy access to a complete development environment and directly rivaled the widely-used id Tech engine.

For the remainder of the late 90's and the early 2000's both Epic and id would battle relentlessly, enticing more and more developers to use their prefabricated studios rather than write their own from scratch. Other studios came and went their own way (Valve, 3D Realms, etc) but the war raged on between the two.

Things started looking grim for id Software in late 2005. Microsoft had released the Xbox 360, and with it announced *Gears of War* as a flagship platform exclusive. The Unreal Engine 3 had already picked up a lot of traction amongst console developers for the breadth of genres it could produce (only 4 games designed with id Tech were not FPS), but the visual splendor of *Gears of War* left developers clamoring for more and the id Tech engine was left in the dust.

Fast-forward to the present. A large majority of modern games are developed using the Unreal Engine 3; almost 100 games using the most recent version alone with many more in development. id Software has slipped in to irrelevancy with only 6 games released on the current id Tech 4 engine and very few planned for the future.

### A New Spark

All is not lost for id Software though. Recently purchased by Bethesda-parent ZeniMax Media the studio has received a new lease on life. With a new iteration of the id Tech engine under development, including support for iOS devices things are looking up.

Their first showcase piece, *Rage HD* has hit the iTunes App Store to tremendous success. With incredible visuals and the first solid example of an FPS on the iPhone, id Software is repeating the path that lead them to PC dominance, only this time in miniature.

Though, unlike the past iterations of the id Tech software, the engine will not be licensed out to other studios. ZeniMax is planning to keep the engine in-house for their own purposes. Using the tech only on games they publish could either attract a wealth of developer attention, or toss the engine into obscurity once more. It's a fine line to walk for ZeniMax and id, especially when they're no longer the only big players out there.

### An Old Challenger Approaches

Since *Rage HD's* release Epic Games has responded with their own high definition iOS game. *Infinity Blade*, developed by the Epic-owned Chair Entertainment, has shown gamers what the Unreal engine can do on mobile.

Offering an immersive fantasy-combat experience and visuals that rival early Xbox 360 games, *Infinity Blade* is a power-house showcase for the Unreal Engine 3 technology. With remarkable sales figures the game has proven that gamers are willing to pay for quality development on a mobile device, and Epic can expect plenty of developers interested in banking on that.

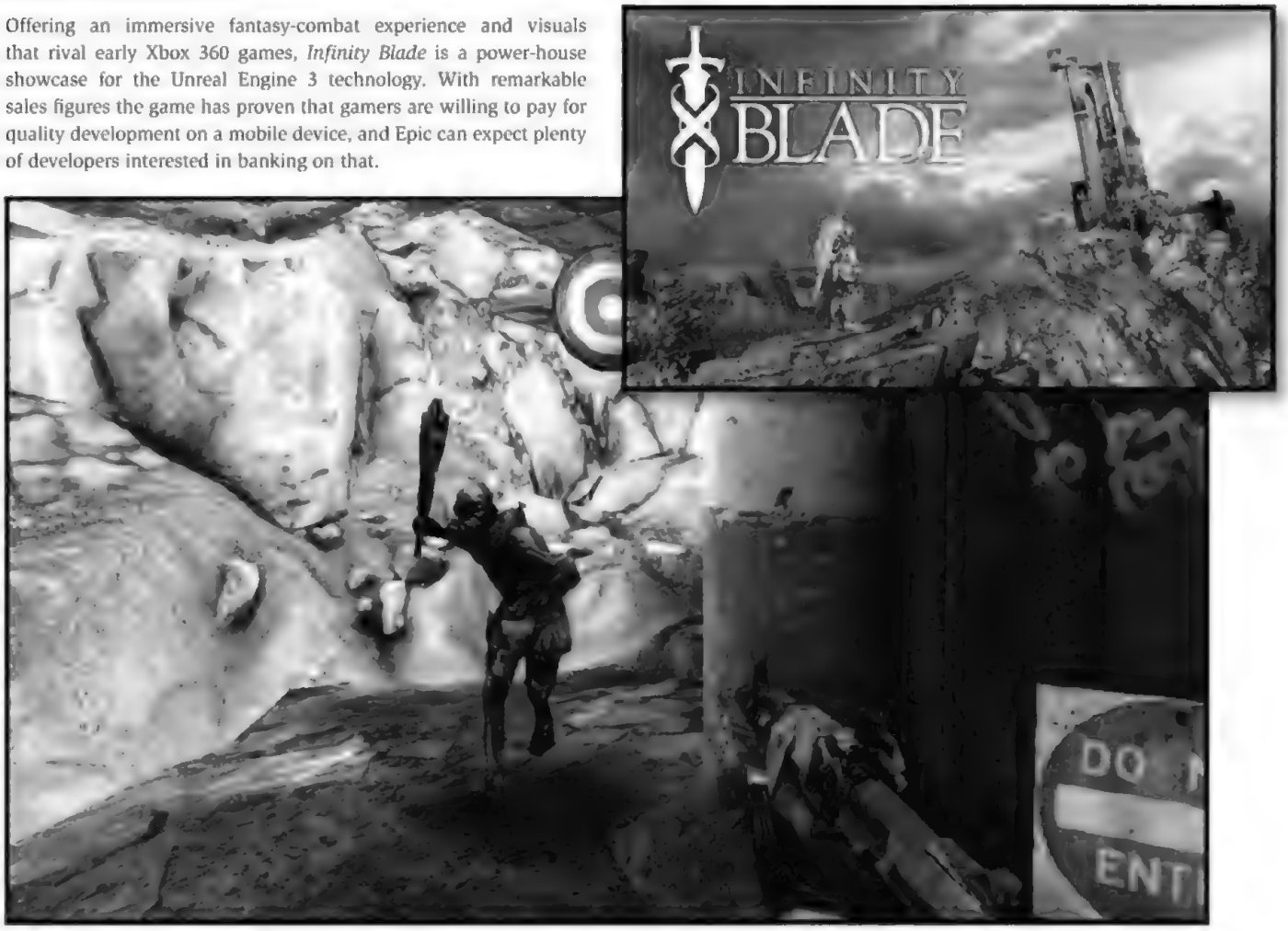
### In To the Future

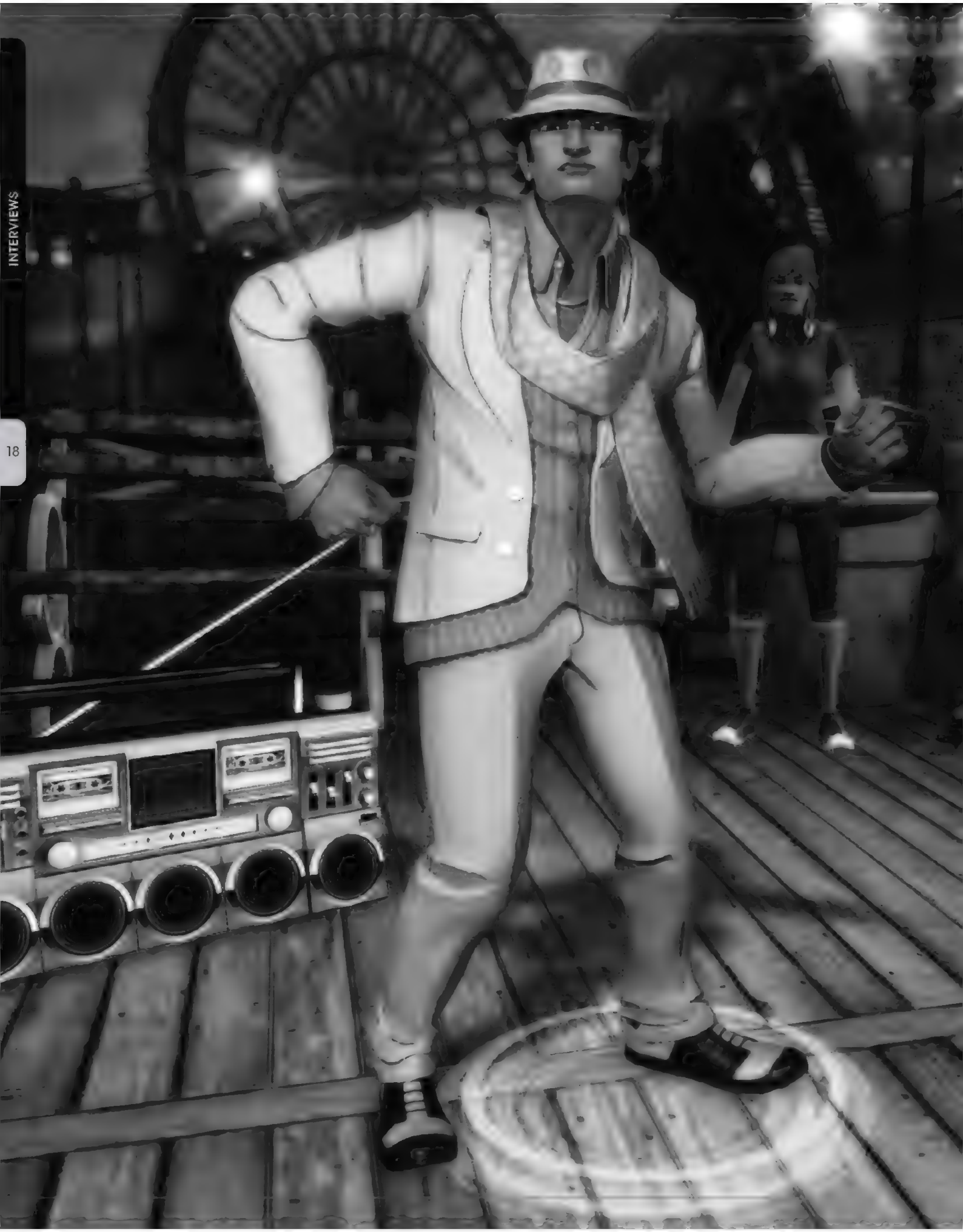
While it looks like the old battle between Epic and id is about to heat up once more there are some key differences between the graphics-war of the 90's and today.

Gamers aren't as interested in impressive graphics as they once were, and the success of the Wii and casual gaming in general is testament to this. Games now sink or swim based on their gameplay, and no development suite can automatically inject good design.

The price of mobile gaming is also dropping, meaning developers no longer have the luxuries a $40 game's budget would offer. These engines don't guarantee sales success and cost a lot to develop for. Developers looking to make the next big mobile game have to work frugally during development and sell a lot of units to make back their investment. This could hinder the appeal of using id Tech or Unreal for a mobile game, and slow the overall progression of mobile graphics.

While these may sounds like fairly ostentatious setbacks the outlook for the future of high-performance mobile gaming is bright. Both id and Epic have proven that high-fidelity games can succeed on a mobile phone and with their success more will surely come. One question remains: How long until one of these engines becomes the predominant leader?





# DANCE REVOLUTION REVOLUTION

Harmonix is brave, we've always known that. Even before *Guitar Hero* set the music game scene aflame, and after *Parappa* made the genre even seem possible, Harmonix was rocking scene with *Frequency*, *Amplitude* and *Karaoke Revolution*. Consistency paid off and their Rock Band series has become the go-to for both gamers and music buffs alike. But no good artist plays the same chord forever (well, other than The Ramones) and no good game studio will rely on the same franchise for too long. When Microsoft revealed Kinect, one of the most positively talked about titles revealed was Harmonix's new project *Dance Central*. Putting down not only the controller, but the plastic instruments as well, *Dance Central* leaves a music playing simulation into a music *enjoyment* simulation (though the enjoyment is far from simulated.) Not limited to buttons or four arrow step-tiles, *Dance Central* will have you up on your feet, breaking virtual reality and actually doing what you see on the screen, something most games certainly cannot boast. I spoke with Kasson Crooker, the project director for Dance Central, about working on a projection ambitiously different from anything the company has done before, but stepping into a brand new form of interaction.

**Did Dance Central come about because of Kinect, or was this something Harmonix had been working on for a while?**

The idea to do a dance game was something we've been talking about for years and years now, probably from two angles. One is that, given that Harmonix is all about music experiences, bringing people into a close experience with music and getting them to interact with music, we had been primarily focusing on instrumental, band, performance style gameplay. But years ago we acknowledged that besides just the instruments, dancing is huge. What better way to feel the music, feel the beat? We agreed that some day we needed to make a dance game. We sort of left it at that, because we really wanted to make sure the experience was authentic in the same way that we bring authenticity through in our other titles. We agreed to put it on hold hoping that at some point the technology would be able to track your whole body, not just your arms or your feet, but everything that you are doing. Because that's the way the choreography works. Long, linear, fluid motion. Instead we focused on Rock Band games for a while, then Microsoft showed us Kinect. It opened our eyes, it was the right time for Harmonix to take on a game like this. So here we are with a dance game!

**What was the research process like and how did you go about covering such a wide and varied subject matter?**

Research was critical to the game. We asked ourselves what exactly we would be focusing on, who the game is for, what sort of dancing they would like and what kind of music they would want to dance to. Is it for people to dance together, is it for people to compete? One of the things that we did right away that hugely influenced the team was bringing in professional choreographers to work with us and be here at Harmonix during the entire process. We had a lot of questions and they would help us answer those questions. Show us different styles, teach it to us, have us try it out. See what it was like to put contemporary choreography over older songs. One of the things I didn't want to do was have a token disco song and a token funk song, I wanted our game to feel more like a big mash-up, where you could see a disco move over a Snoop Dogg song.

**Something I was initially impressed with was the song selection, ranging from Lady Gaga to Beastie Boys to Young MC. How was the song selection process different from what you had been doing with Rock Band?**

It was similar in some respect but wildly different because of the choreography angle. Throughout the project we had these 'song fights', where a small group of us would get together and bring songs from different perspectives. But in regards as to how it was similar to Rock Band, we sort of knew who the game was for, the kind of music they would want to dance to, and what was important for me was having a variety. I wanted a selection that would appeal to a lot of different people. How far back did we want to go? Did we want to shoot all the way back to the '50s and have players doing the twist? At some point we decided to draw the line around '70's funk and disco. We constantly asked ourselves if we had enough songs that spanned over generations or certain genres, and then the choreographers would chip in some information, showing us the choreography that would match certain types of songs which would help us decide how many of those songs we wanted. The bulk of our song list leans towards the more contemporary, pop, hip-hop, R&B, dance hall sort of stuff but there are some classics in between.

**Should we expect DLC and add-ons in the same fashion as Rock Band?**

DLC is going to be huge, because then not only do we get to go into a more varied selection of songs, but every song will come with an original dance routine. It will be great to keep offering that sort of content after the game ships.

**How is multiplayer going to function?**

The main multiplayer mode we are going to focus on is 'Dance Battle', where two players will trade off and face off on a single song. One player dances and moves and then the next player will try to better them on the same moves, doing it back and forth until the game will choose a winner. That's the competitive angle, the other is akin to my relating this game to karaoke. Really fun to do with your friends, not only because it's fun to do but it's also fun to watch. While it's tracking only one person, we found that it was fun to dance together. From our experience, players didn't care that only one person was being tracked by the machine, they just had fun dancing with each other.

**Many games have 'party' in the title, or have party style elements. But this game feels more like a reason for the party on top of just being included.**

Totally, in the same way Rock Band has become a staple at parties this will be a whole new selection in the same idea. This is something people can leave on in the background, have friends step-up, try it out, have fun and listen to good music.

**Where you excited to work on something that would exclude plastic instruments?**

I've been with Harmonix for about ten years, and getting the opportunity to make a non-peripheral based music game and focus on a completely different experience has been really exciting. The whole team has been really psyched to craft a new identity and break away from Rock Band, come up with new characters and venues. All of the fun and gnarly design challenges that making a sensor based game that interacts with the dancers has just been really interesting.

**When I played it, it was hard to ignore the 'freestyle' session that breaks up each song. Where the screen goes all trippy and the player is just let loose to do whatever. But then find out that during this time, Kinect has been recording snap-shots of them to release upon the room around them. Was this introduced to give players a break, a change-up, or just get a chance to prank them once in front of pals?**

It's basically all of those things. We have tried to include in all of our games, moments where the player could do whatever they want. Even back to *Frequency* and *Amplitude* we had the remix segments. In *Rock Band* the vocalist could go into overdrive, along with the drum fills and we looked at dancing and agreed that it would be a mistake to avoid the opportunity to give players a moment to do whatever they want. From that we decided what visual stimulation we could use to do this, what would give them instantaneous feedback. Then we thought it would also be the best time to take photos, catching people in the right positions, trying out different things. But it's also a break in the intensity of the dance segments,

which helped us craft how long each song level would be, because with such physical games it's only natural people would get tired. So it served a bunch of purposes.

**With the Nintendo Wii and Sony's new Move, do you think we'll see any ports or does this specifically compliment Kinect?**

No, actually at this point Microsoft is an amazing partner so we are definitely dialled on Kinect.

**Are you concerned those hesitant to get up and dance? How have you addressed someone who's a little bit uncomfortable with the activity?**

Our primary player is a non-dancer, someone we identified when we crafted our game, a method to get someone to stand up and give dancing a try. I think that through that, especially through difficulty, you can find somewhere right for players to start, the right place. If you drop them into super-complicated routines they could get overwhelmed. That is where it was critical we come up with an entry level set of songs, dance moves. We have some routines that are barely dance moves, simple clapping, simple stepping, but that is what it takes to get people accustomed to the rhythm and ready for the harder stuff. Then when they realize that they can do that, that it's fun to stand up and try it out, it's easy to keep going and you find you now know some dance moves. One thing we've been trying to tell people is that everyone encounters dancing in their life. They end up at the bar mitzvah, or a wedding, or their prom. Especially for guys, it'll be hard to get the girl if you're standing against the wall. I think we've created a game that will really bring in the non-dancers and make them feel more comfortable to try stuff out.

**That said I don't think we should expect any prom-style slow dancing DLC.**

"This is something people can leave on in the background, have friends step-up, try it out, have fun and listen to good music."

No, no, we're keeping it fast and hip.

**Has making this game made you a better dancer?**

Totally. It was interesting, when we originally crafted the team we wanted to make sure there was a variety of people with different backgrounds on the subject. Like Naoko, for example, was the lead producer on Beatles: Rock Band and is a lead producer on Dance Central, she has a dance background, she used to dance, she knows choreography and even helped us get in contact with many of the choreographers we used. I was the counterpoint to her. I represented the willing but sceptical non-dancer, a little awkward and gawky. It was good to have this range of people. Able to constantly represent the player experience of both the dancer and non-dancer. We could know what newcomers would struggle with because I was struggling with it. After playing the game so much now, it's amazing because a lot of the sets I can jump right into hard and feel like I'm keeping up. This game has tought me how to dance.

# A VIEW FROM THE TOWER

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBIN FURTH

JOEL CORNIL

Robin Furth is the well of knowledge when it comes to all things Stephen King. Having worked as Mr. King's personal research assistant for many years, she has served as the lead authority for Marvel's *Dark Tower* comics, as well as all the author of *The Dark Tower: A Complete Concordance* and much more related reference material. She has also had a heavy hand in the upcoming *Dark Tower* films, though any details on those have been few and far between. We had a chance to sit down with Robin recently and discuss all things *Dark Tower*.

**CGM: What has struck you the most about the *Dark Tower* series (for the novels and the comics) as a whole?**

RF: Wow — that's a big question! I suppose it's the fact that the series feels more relevant now than ever. Although Mid-World has its own terrible beauty, it is also a wasteland. It is a landscape full of huge deserts, animal and plant mutations, ruined cities, and abandoned weapons. Long before Roland's time, a highly advanced culture, known as the Great Old Ones, ruled Mid-World. Although these people had the knowledge of gods, they were also reckless and warlike. It was the fallout of their wars that caused Mid-World's mutations and the horrible desiccation of the landscape. In *The Waste Lands*, we see one of the Great Old Ones' major cities. It is called Lud and is much like our world's New York. In fact, it seems very likely that Lud *is* a future version of our New York. Hence, the fate of Roland's world is a fate that quite possibly could await our world.

When Stephen King started the *Dark Tower* series well over thirty years ago, global warming wasn't something that people thought about. But now, Mid-World's spreading deserts seem eerily familiar. We live in a time of widespread war, of genetic engineering, of new and bizarre diseases. All over the world frogs are mutating, and poisons in the air, land, and water are having horrible effects on humans and animals. Whether we like it or not, our world and Mid-World are drawing closer together all the time.

**The character of Roland Deschain is at once mythical and deeply personal/familiar. If at all, how has Roland changed for you from the novels to the comics? Has his development or persona changed in the transition?**

"Whether we like it or not, our world and Mid-World are drawing closer together all the time."

RF: I suppose for me, it's not so much that Roland has changed, but that we've had the chance to really delve into the early part of his life. When we first meet Roland in *The Gunslinger*, he is a hardened warrior who is used to traveling alone. His humanity—his ability to care and to love—have atrophied during his many years searching for the *Dark Tower*. Over the course of the novels, Roland learns to feel again, and he learns to love.

In the *Dark Tower* comics, we tell the opposite story—how Roland became the hardened man we meet at the beginning of *The Gunslinger*. We begin with Roland as a boy of fourteen—a boy who has been tricked into taking his test of manhood years too early. Against all odds he has won his guns in a one-on-one battle with his teacher Cort, but his trials are only beginning.

In *The Gunslinger Born* (a retelling of Stephen King's novel *Wizard and Glass*) Roland and his two tet-mates Cuthbert and Alain are sent east to the town of Hambry. While there, they discover that many of the towns believed to be loyal to the gunslingers and the Affiliation have already fallen to John Farson. Although familiar with courtly intrigue, they are now faced with life-threatening treachery. They defeat their enemies, but Roland's true love—Susan Delgado—is declared a traitor to her town and is burned to death on a Charyou Tree fire.

In *Treachery*, we learn that the city of Gilead has been infiltrated by the gunslingers' enemies. Roland is tricked by the magical *glammer* of the seeing sphere known as Maerlyn's Grapefruit into killing his mother. While Roland is placed in prison, all of the elder gunslingers are murdered, one by one. In *The Fall of Gilead*, Farson's men besiege the city, and Roland and his tet-mates are forced to

TAE LEE · ISANOVE

"For myself, I have lived with these characters for so long that they feel like old friends."



first defend their home, and then to abandon it. In *The Battle of Jericho Hill*, the young gunslingers are finally defeated, and in *The Journey Begins*, Roland becomes the solitary wanderer we meet in the original novels.

**The comic series has both retold familiar stories and shown the reader entirely new ones. In continuing the series, will the focus be on retelling old stories or revealing new ones? Or will it be something entirely different?**

RF: I don't want to let too many cats out of bags, but I will say that as Roland ages, longtime fans will encounter many adventures that they have come to love. However, they are in for some surprises as well!

**The mythology and history of Mid-World is as deep as it is unexplored. Will the series show us more of the universe that we've yet to see thus far?**

RF: Oh yes. That's one of the pleasures of working on these comics!

**The 8th novel, The Wind Through The Keyhole, has been announced with no due date. Have as-of-yet unknown expansions of the universe been something you consider when plotting the books?**

RF: As you can imagine, I can't say anything about *The Wind Through the Keyhole* other than it will come! (If I say anything else the low men will get me.) I have so much respect for Steve King's work and I love talking with him about Mid-World. Whenever possible I run our ideas by him before we begin, since I want him to be pleased with what we do. But whenever I plot a comic book, I keep in mind the end of the *Dark Tower* novels. I don't want to give any spoilers, but suffice it to say that there are many worlds which spin about the Tower, and reality is a little different in each of them. Hence, there is room for many different versions of reality in the *Dark Tower* Universe. What must remain consistent is the vision.

**Ka is a wheel. Considering the ending of the novels, is the comic series a retelling of the novels that fills in all the gaps, or is it a new progression/continuation from the end of the novels forward?**

RF: I think you can look at it either way. Roland has cycled through his tale many times. We are exploring one of those sequences of events!

**Is there an end goal in sight for the comic series?**

RF: If I told you that it would ruin the fun!

**What's been challenging about developing the universe/characters/story of another writer, especially one like Stephen King?**

RF: Most important of all is to feel that Steve King is happy with what we do. He is an extremely generous and supportive person, and I have learned so much from him. Developing characters created by another writer—especially one so incredibly talented and beloved—can be downright terrifying at times, but all we can do is try our best. All the folks involved in the *Dark Tower* comics are huge Stephen King fans and huge *Dark Tower* fans, so that really helps. For myself, I have lived with these characters for so long that they feel like old friends. I shut my eyes and I can hear their voices. I just hope that this love, and this feeling of deep kinship with the characters and the tales, comes across to readers.

**In generalities and specifics, what is next in the *Dark Tower* comic series?**

RF: We are moving into the stories told in *The Gunslinger*, though first we will do a little side trip into Eluria!

**What steps do you take to write for a newcomer to Mid-World and at the same time a person who's read every word?**

RF: I think that all of us really try to recreate the world that Stephen King writes about in his novels. The artists are amazing at conjuring the images of Mid-World, and Peter David does a fantastic job with his narration. He really draws readers in. For my part, I always try to stand and be true to the original vision. If we can just open the door to Mid-World, then hopefully readers both new and old will be able to enjoy being there.

Magazines Canada

# THE ROLE OF THE WRITER AND PRODUCER IN TODAY'S GAMING INDUSTRY

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSE SCOBLE

[illegible]

Gaming has garnered a growing presence in Canada's Fan Expo in the past few years due to the efforts of individuals like Jesse Scoble. A freelance writer, editor, and game designer, Jesse Scoble has worked on multiple games and contributed to more than thirty publications, including the recently released collection of essays, *The Bones*. Last year, Jesse was a guest on the first Fan Expo video game panel. This year, Jesse organized the State of the Local Industry panel, and organized and moderated the Writers and Producers panel. The panel, which packed the seminar room to about 150 people, canvassed the role of the writer and producer in today's video game industry. *C&G Monthly* spoke with Jesse Scoble shortly after the panel to discuss his take on the role of the game writer, the myths relative to the occupation, and ways to break into the industry.

**C&G Monthly: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?**

**Jesse Scoble**: I worked in the pen and paper industry for about five years. I started off as an Administrative Assistant to a small independent publishing house, working for a friend. The owner knew I had a background in writing and English Lit, so I got a chance to work on a couple of game books. By the end of my five years there I was Creative Director and championing my own projects. I developed four critically acclaimed game lines, including *A Game of Thrones d20* (working with George Martin). The company unfortunately went bankrupt, but I was lucky enough to have made a friend of Sean Fish, then lead writer at Cryptic's *City of Heroes*. He suggested I apply for a gig at their publisher, NCsoft, down in Austin. I became the Community Writer for several MMOs [*City of Heroes, Dungeon Runners, Exteel, Lineage*] writing web articles and stories, and doing online community support. When my sheriff got beat, I moved back to Toronto and worked as a Senior Writer and Designer at Ganz for two and a half years. These days I'm a full-time dad and a part time freelancer.

**When you started pitching the idea for this panel, what did you have in mind?**

**JS**: There's a hunger to know more about the video game industry. Last year I was a guest on the first ever game panel at Fan Expo. It was good, but it was very high level. It didn't get into the nitty gritty of how games are made. And there are a lot of fans that

come to these shows who want to know how to write for comics, games or books. That was the start of it. Toronto's game scene is still weak compared to Vancouver, Montreal, Austin, or LA, but it's getting stronger. With Ubisoft Toronto just opening and some other developing money coming in, it seemed like a good time to start tying those kinds of companies into Fan Expo, too.

**Can you tell us a bit about the panellists?**

**JS**: Max Peisner is a freelance writer and designer. He most notably worked at Silicon Knights on *Too Human* and is currently working on some other unannounced projects. Kimberly Sparks writes for games, television, and film. She was at SK for a time, and also teaches video game writing at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, and Media Writing at Seneca College and Humber College. Joseph Ganetakos worked on titles for pretty much every modern console. He was at Pseudo Interactive on the *Cel Damage* line. I worked with him at Ganz, and he is currently a Creative Lead for a project there. And Alex Parizeau is a Senior Producer at Ubisoft Toronto. He's working on the new *Splinter Cell* game.

**What would you say the difference is between a freelance writer and a salaried writer?**

**JS**: I think freelance writers tend to work tighter deadlines, slightly more insane hours, and shorter contracts with more crunch time. They'll often be brought in to do a small chunk of work, especially for bigger studios. In some cases, towards the end of the process, big studios will bring in a handful of writers to do all of the secondary dialogue – the barks, which are those "Oh, I've been shot!" lines. They'll need a hundred variations of that. Any one person doing all of those would go insane, so they may hand it out to about ten different people and say, "Each of you write ten versions of this." It's still tough sometimes, but freelance writers will often do that. Freelance writers can also often be caught in revision hell, but when you've delivered something you're done with it. You can move onto something else.

If you're salaried you tend to stay with a project. Ideally you are involved with development from conception until a game goes live, and you might even contribute to it afterwards. You'll also end up doing more tasks at the company. You may be asked to write marketing copy, advertising copy, forms, stories for the website, quest dialogue, and maybe work with the level designers. You tend to do far more than just writing.

**We briefly discussed that writing in the game industry is a Catch 22. If you don't have experience, you'll have trouble landing a salaried job, but if you haven't had a job, you'll have trouble landing freelance gigs. At the Expo, it seemed like a lot of the people who were watching the panel found game writing to be a mysterious, impenetrable field. As you said earlier, you personally started off doing admin work and moved into writing afterwards. Do think there are any specific ways that someone could get their foot in the door if they're interested?**

**JS**: I think that, like Hollywood stories, everyone's got their own breaking-in story. They're all unique. That said, you commonly hear of people who started off doing testing, QA or forum moderation – ideally in junior paid positions, or as interns.

People also volunteer and many on the panel got into the industry that way. My first industry gigs ever involved volunteering at conventions like the Fan Expo, running demos.

I think when you're in your late teens, early twenties – even mid to late twenties these days –you're hungry and you have a lot of passion that you can capitalize on to volunteer. Do some work for free, then make contacts and follow through on them. Follow up,

talk to people, and knock on all the doors. A lot of junior positions will give you a sense of what a company does and give you a shot at internal postings. If you have a proven track record you can use that to help open doors in the industry.

With access to the Internet and online sales these days, the barrier to entry is a lot lower. If you put together a good game, get some reviews, some response, some credit, you can use that to help show off your game design background. And if you want to be a writer, you don't 100% need game design, though it does help to be familiar with the medium and understand its limitations.

**Do you think there's any formal training or training that can be done on the side, aside from volunteering and knocking on doors, which could make an aspiring writer more marketable in the game world?**

**JS**: I always value people who can write well and some of that can come from getting a degree, such as English Lit or Creative Writing degree. I think in terms of university structure, Liberal Arts degrees offer pretty good grounding. Otherwise, some knowledge of history and the modern world, wide exposure to different writing styles, the ability to edit, understanding structure, and being able to tell powerful stories are all important skills.

In terms of doing stuff on the side: write, write, write, write. There are some fundamentals in screenwriting that apply to game writing, and work like Robert McKee's *Story* is often cited. I'd also recommend the IGDA's *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*, and maybe Jesse Schell's *The Art of Game Design: A book of lenses*. Don't neglect sites like GamaSutra, either, as they often have features on writing and narrative design.

If you can, go to the IGDA, make contacts, and go to writing panels. The Austin GDC, or whatever they call it these days, has a great writing track. Not everyone can afford to do some of these things, but they are good ways to network and hear what other people value.

> "A lot of junior positions will give you a sense of what a company does and give you a shot at internal postings. If you have a proven track record you can use that to help open doors in the industry."

**At the panel it seemed there were a lot of people who had a certain image of what a writer did in the game industry. What do you think the myth of the writer is and what are some myth busters you can share with us?**

**JS**: I think the myth is someone who may or may not work in an actual office with everybody else, naps half the day, works until 3 or 4 in the morning fuelled by coffee or whisky, and dreams of these awesome ideas that flows beautifully from fingertip to keyboard. There are a couple of people who probably do that – who are tremendously prolific and at a high calibre of writing – but for the rest of us, the reality is that writing is hard work. I joke with people that I don't like writing, but I like having written. And there is a little truth to that. There are days where I just stare at the blank screen for hours on end and it just doesn't click and everything is more interesting - Twitter, web pages, vacuuming my house. When working freelance it's especially difficult because you're not in an office environment with people breathing down your neck. Some days you may do four hours of work in a twelve hour period. That's one of the real truths. You have to practice and work at it.

You also have to sell your ideas to whoever you're reporting to. I've had pitch documents where I wrote all this back story so it would

GHOST RECON: FUTURE SOLDIER

be clear what direction the game was going in, but the client would read the back story as the game and say, "No, this is not what we want." I knew that, but my presentation was wrong. You have to learn not just how to present, but how to present to each audience. Those are all tricks you have to puzzle out

**A lot of the panellists were talking about the input of the writer in a large corporation. Sometimes you write something and it gets stepped on by everyone else. What do you think the importance of the writer is these days in large gaming companies?**

**JS**: It's tricky because, with games, you don't always need a writer. You just need a programmer and some art. You don't need a writer for Pac Man. You don't need a writer for Tetris. More so, I think there's been little evidence so far that directly correlates great story with great sales.

With that being said, I think the industry as a whole is beginning to recognize that having compelling characters, engaging stories, and interesting plots, adds an extra level to a game. It helps tie things together. It engages players and makes them interested in the sequel. Companies are starting to understand this and bring writers in earlier. As a result, writers end up being champions of the story for all other departments.

As a writer, you sell the idea to the other departments so they buy in and get excited about it. In Ganz, on one project I ended up doing a high level story presentation for the development team. It was early in the process and honestly the programmers didn't need to know one scrap of it. I figured it would bore them to tears, so I kept to the simplest beats and tried to get out. But in the end everyone seemed excited and interested. There was enough there that they could see the potential and could even start riffing off it, saying, "This is what should happen next!" As a writer, that's what you want. You want to ignite that passion for the rest of the team.

The dangers are when you have to work in an environment that doesn't really value the writer. Then people will overwrite you, make you cut things or come up with random rationalizations of why certain things have to stay the way they are when it's better to revise.

I think writers still have a long way to go in earning cred and respect for what they do, but we're making small steps.

**Would you consider doing this again next year?**

**JS**: I'd love to do another writer's panel next year. Other conventions have proven you can do a whole writers track and I would probably look at some of those as examples of how to tailor it. For example, you can look at a particular company or a specific game - break down BioWare's writing style, or Ubisoft's new *Splinter Cell* game, or whatever.

One of the questions that I didn't get a chance to ask today arose from a recent conversation that I had with Alex Parizeau: How do you create an awesome villain in a game? In movies and comics, we have our Darth Vaders and Magnetos and Hans Grubers – lots of terrific villains. Rich Dansky tackled this subject in *the Escapist* recently [see "Bring on the Bad Guy" http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_262/7809-Bring-On-the-Bad-Guy], but I think you could get a whole panel just out of that question.

Based on how the response goes and what the Fan Expo organizers want, we will be there next year.

**Finally, any last projects you'd like to highlight?**

JS: Because of the nature of NDAs, I can't talk about video game projects. But Gameplaywright just published *The Bones*, a terrific collection of essays about our relationship with dice and how they make us crazy. I'm thrilled to be in there with luminaries like Wil Wheaton, John Kovalic, and Ken Hite. I've also contributed to the new *A Song of Ice and Fire RPG* by Green Ronin. You can also learn more about me from my website at www.jscoble.com or follow me on Twitter @jscoble. Thanks for your interest!

# SAM WITWER

## THE FAN UNLEASHED

JAMES GARTLEY

Ask Sam Witwer what it was like to meet George Lucas, and his answer says it all. "I don't really get nervous around people anymore - I was *very* nervous around him. It's *George Lucas*...you're just like 'Whoa!'"

You can't really blame the articulate 33-year-old for sounding a bit like an awestruck fanboy. Born in 1977, Witwer grew up right at the start of the original wave of *Star Wars* mania. Now an accomplished actor, he's landed a role that most fans would trade their lightsabers for, as Vader's secret apprentice Starkiller in the *Star Wars: Force Unleashed* video game and its 2010 follow-up, *Force Unleashed II*.

The story of how that came about, like any *Star Wars* adventure, is a combination of determination and yes, maybe even destiny. Witwer's friend and audio director on the project, David Collins, reached out to him upon seeing concept artwork for the game's lead character and noticing a striking resemblance. After his headshot was slipped into the pile, however, it was up to Witwer to prove he had more to offer than just a physical resemblance.

"In terms of how we built the character," he recalls, "in the forty-five minute audition I did it every possible way that I could think of. I was like, 'I know *Star Wars*, so I can give you however many reads you want, because these scenes you've given me don't really suggest a character and I think that's on purpose: you want to see what I bring to it. I'll tell you right now, I'm not comfortable with picking any one take for this. Can I just show you fifty takes?' So I showed fifty takes."

An unusual situation, he's quick to admit, as most auditions last less than fifteen minutes, but one that allowed him to draw upon of his considerable knowledge of the franchise. "If he was a Sith Apprentice, I would do a Darth Maul-type read. If they wanted more of an attitude thing, I'd bring a Harrison Ford cockiness to it. If they wanted a more wide-eyed Luke Skywalker read, I'd do that. I was just doing every shade of *Star Wars*-type archetype in that audition."

So there was a Jar Jar read, then? "There was *not* a Jar-Jar read," Witwer chuckles, "but had we gone for fifty minutes, I'm sure it would have come up."

In the end, the lengthy audition paid off in spades, landing Witwer the coveted role while also providing producer Haden Blackman with further inspiration to flesh out the character's personality. "When I finally got the script, I was all worried, wondering 'which one did they decide to go with?' and it turns out they went with all of them. When he's talking to Darth Vader, he sounds more Sith Apprentice, you know "*what is thy bidding, my Master*?" and all that shit. And then when he's talking to Proxy he's a little bit "*Alright Proxy, let's go, let's get this done*!" and it's a little bit more casual. Then when he's talking to Juno, it's a different guy. Really, depending on who he's with, you have these different aspects of his character."

A character who, it must be said, is anything but your typical, run-of-the-mill video game protagonist. Players spent their time in the first *Force Unleashed* game finding out whether the apprentice would follow orders and hunt down Jedis or let his conscience be his guide. Then, the sequel brought him back to life, leaving game players wondering if he was nothing more than a clone of the original gone mad. It's a character-arc quite removed from those of Luke or even Anakin. For Witwer, though, there's perhaps a broader context in which to frame the character's appeal.

"I think he's a *Star Wars* protagonist for the 21st century in that in the '70s, there was a lot of cynicism and you know...Watergate, Vietnam and all that stuff. That's bad. Everyone was feeling pretty bad about themselves. I understand the '70s were a very cynical time but I don't know if they match up with how cynical we've become now, because I don't know if they had the media machine as tuned in and dialed in as it is now, where basically there's white noise everywhere, you don't know who to listen to, who is lying to you, or who is telling you the truth. You just have this sickening feeling you're being manipulated and lied to. That's what this character is going through, from the beginning, in *Force Unleashed*. He's this guy who has a terrible relationship with an adopted father and he works for this all-encompassing empire that looms over his head. He does bad things but he's only doing what he's told and he's responsible for all this awful, awful stuff that happens in all these other places and eventually he's got to figure out how to shed all of that; how to get rid of the white noise and how to start thinking for himself before he can become even what Luke was when he started as the farm boy. So, it's an interesting take on the Luke Skywalker thing, I think. It's why people like the character. They sort of see themselves in his predicament. We all see ourselves as Luke Skywalker, but I think this is a very 21st Century-specific take, in terms of growing up in our generation."

With both feature film trilogies wrapped up, this generation of *Star Wars* fans are eagerly anticipating news on the long-stalled live action series. Sadly, Witwer has none to share, except to say, "there is no plan right now to make me involved" and "I'd love to do anything for those guys." The project, first announced in 2005 during a fan convention in Indiana, looks to fill in the narrative gaps between *Episode Three: Revenge of the Sith* and *Episode Four: A New Hope* – the same time period during which the *Force Unleashed* games are set. Whether or not *Star Wars*-sized special effects can be delivered on a weekly basis, however, remains to be seen. As Witwer puts it, "they need to figure out how to do it economically," adding that the plans are "extremely ambitious."

It's a safe bet, mind you, that his involvement in the world of *Star Wars* is far from over. Though he won't go into detail, it's clear from his description of that chat with Mr. Lucas that plans are in the works. "I got a little bit more love from Lucasfilm recently," he teases, "and there's stuff that I can't really talk about yet, but... certain people are liking what I did."

Then, once again, the inner geek bubbles up to the surface. "I'm hoping I can leverage that into a visit to the archives. I just want to get into the goddamn archives man! I just want to see the stuff!"

Spoken like a true fan, Sam.

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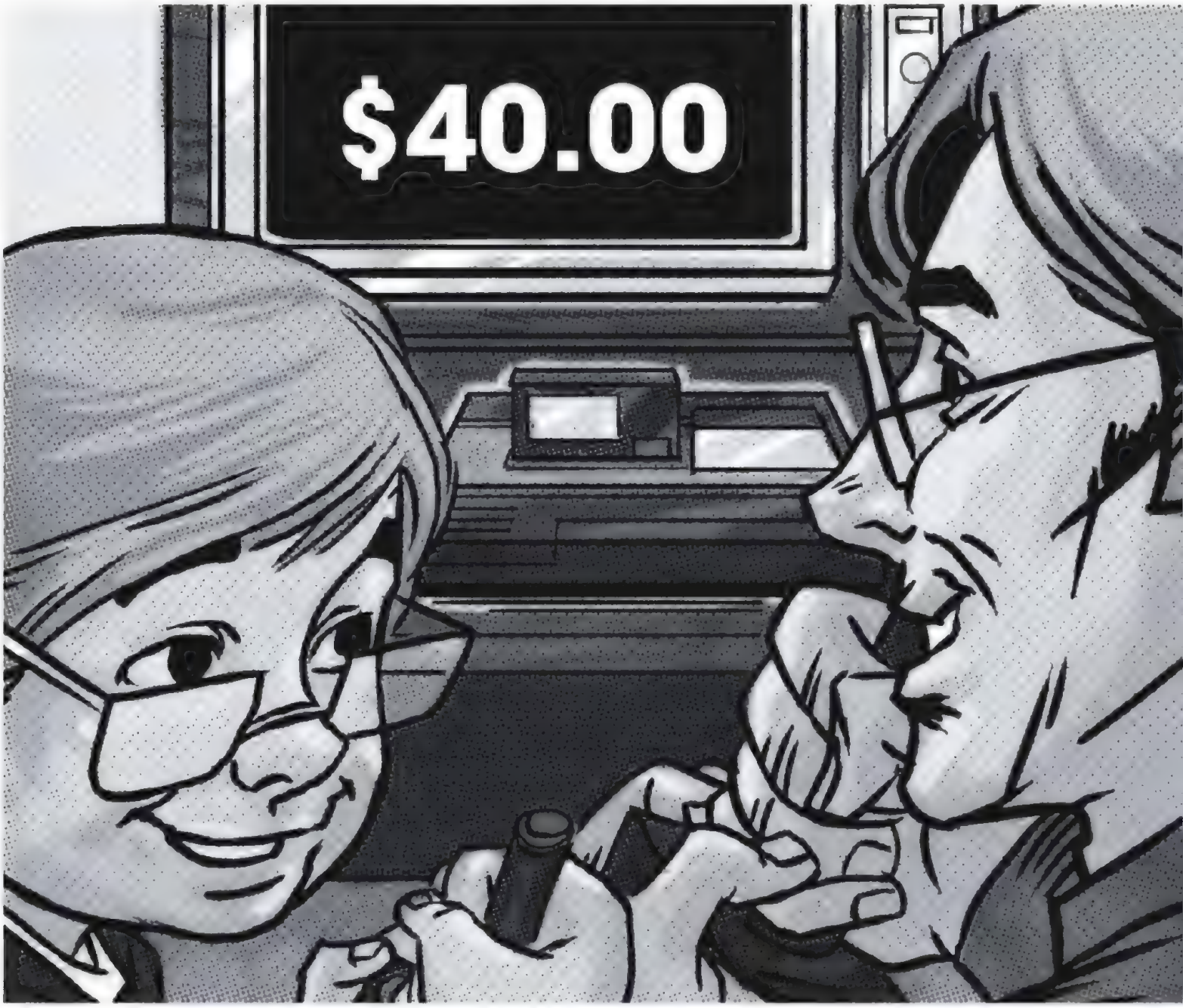


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# WORLD TORN ASUNDER

## A LOOK AT CATACLYSM

JUSTIN AMIRKHANI

With *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* literally tearing the world's biggest MMO apart we thought it might be a good idea to sit down with some of the folks at Blizzard and discuss what the transitory nature of Azeroth really means for players.

**Why do you think people get so immersed in MMO games and what is it about Azeroth in particular that draws so many people in?**

**J Allen Brack** That's a really good question. On the first point I think MMOs have done a really good job of blending the elements of a good game with a social aspect, which kind of forms this co-operative sort of gameplay where you team up to defeat other players or the computer. It's an example of where you can't do certain things by yourself, you need your friends, and through that sort of comradery and triumphing over adversaries together you form really strong bonds with people online. So, I think the magic of MMOs comes from that mix of social plus good gameplay.

As for why Azeroth's been successful I think it has to do with the history of the IP. *Warcraft* is 16 years old this year and it has a really long history through a lot of different games, and our ability to tell stories within the Warcraft universe has really grown over the years.

**Tom Chilton** I think that people get invested in MMOs because they provide a huge potential amount of entertainment time. If you compare it to a movie where you go in and spend your two hours with it, with an MMO there's a huge amount of flexibility to how much time you spend playing on any given day. There's a ton of

content and hundreds of hours to play, and eventually as you play the game a whole lot and make friends you get very invested in the MMO as your main source of entertainment.

As far as *World of Warcraft* itself, I think that ultimately the biggest reason it's successful because the world has a soul. It's very difficult to play for only a couple hours because it's very inviting and makes you want to explore more of the world. There's a lot to see and do, and that gives the world its soul.

I think different things appeal to different players in general. The thing we've done with Azeroth is to try and keep a cohesive experience, particularly with *Cataclysm*.

**What do you think of terms like "Virtual Resident" do you believe players can truly have another existence inside the MMO, or is it always just a game?**

**J Allen Brack** In the case of *World of Warcraft* it's definitely a game. There have been a lot of different online-type environments that have tried to go more towards the virtual resident style, or what we imagine that experience is like for players. With *World of Warcraft* though, our primary focus is fun and a lot of times that is antithetical to what you'd expect from a virtual resident scenario.

**With *Cataclysm* you're dramatically changing the world of Azeroth. What does this mean for players who've already invested countless hours in the world that was?**

**J Allen Brack** I don't think we're changing it to something new or unfamiliar. I think we're taking the best pieces of what there is and making them better. We're taking what existed and making it better.

I know there has been some concern, and there was a lot of concern internally too. Did we really want to start down this road and were we killing our baby or transforming it in to something else? But, having put a lot of time in to it over the past year and seeing players' reactions now that parts are starting to come online, I'm confident that no one is going to have that opinion.

The new content we've created is head and shoulders above what existed. The world now has this feeling where you're walking through these new areas and new stories, but familiar themes and all the major players are there. It's like a sequel to the book where all these things are very similar, but there's a new story to be had.

**Unlike previous expansions *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* only features 5 new levels instead of the usual 10. How did condensing that end-game experience change the rest of the game?**

**Tom Chilton** Really, it allowed us to overhaul the 1-60 experience. Now, having said that it wasn't a 1:1 trade. Obviously it took us a lot longer to redesign the level 1-60 experience than it would have taken to add an additional 5 levels and that's part of why this expansion took longer to get out.

But, we felt it was something important to do for the game because we've gotten better and better at making content and we wanted to make sure the first 60 levels were up to the quality of our 60-80 content.

Really, that was one of the driving factors for us and what we learned was that's not just for new players. The 1-60 content that we've redone is also very much for veteran players because players don't just level up one character and call it quits. They often have a lot of fun the first time and go back and do it again with a new character. So, ultimately redoing that 1-60 experience is also for all those veteran players who like to go through it again a second, third, or fifth time.

**Ray Cobo** The impetus for that decision really came from our desire to keep evolving Azeroth and keep the world moving. When we did Outland and Northrend in *Burning Crusade* and *Lich King* we learned a lot and the experience was really well done. We wanted to take that knowledge and apply it to the 1-60 zones and bring those up to snuff. We learned so much during the past two expansions this was really about creating a single cohesive experience.

**For a lot of new players this post-*Cataclysm* world is all they'll know of Azeroth. Is anything being done to preserve the history of the world, or is that loss just part of keeping a persistent changing world?**

**Ray Cobo** We have talked a lot about building that in to the quest lines, so there may be some references to how things used to be or what things were like before. But, the only way players will really be able to experience what things were like before is based on memory or what the fan-sites catalogue.

A lot of players have taken screenshots and posted them online showing the before and after, but otherwise it's gone. The world has changed, and it's changed forever.

**J Allen Brack** The old world is lost, and going back the motivation for us to do this was that we started talking about creating two new playable races for players. We didn't know it was going to be called *Cataclysm* or what the story was going to be, but when we thought of players leveling up through content that was over 6 years old that people have done many many times, it wasn't particularly exciting. The best stuff that you do is always the newest, and the level of quest content we'd seen in the past two expansions was far superior to the old brown box.

Anyone that says "I want to go back to the old world, how it used to be", you really don't want to do that. The game we've made now is orders of magnitude better than the game that we had.

**The addition of Goblins and Worgen as playable characters is one of the big changes with *Cataclysm*. How do they fit in to the lore and how do you inject them in to a world that's already filled with so much history?**

**J Allen Brack** Well, neither of them are actually new to the *Warcraft* universe. Goblins have been a staple race for a long time, I think starting in *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*. They've been there for a really long time and they've been requested for quite a number of years.

As for Worgen we had them in the original game, in a dungeon called Shadowfang Keep as a mid-20's level dungeon. For those who played the old content a lot of people thought it was one of the best

dungeons with the way it was structured and the bosses. So, we kind of started with this idea of having a transforming race and figuring out the mechanics of that but the Worgen played in to that really well so we used them.

**Ray Cobo** We've done a couple of things with these races that we've never done before. With the Worgen we've taken a race that's more beast-like, aggressive, and darker and given them to the Alliance which is not like how it goes typically.

The Goblins are a little crazier, a little zany with this sort of crazy culture. As characters they're a little more light-hearted and fun, and that's not something you usually find with The Horde. But by no means are they just The Horde's version of the Gnomes, they have their very own unique sort of flavour.

In terms of the 1-20 experience with each of the new races we thought a lot about how to make the experience easier. We've added a lot of new UI options and a lot of ways for players to get help along the way so the player has a much easier time figuring out where to go and what to do because the quest line helps them.

**You just hit a big milestone with *World of Warcraft*'s 6th anniversary. Looking back at the game over the past 6 years and seeing how it's evolved, what do you think has changed the most?**

**Tom Chilton** I would say that most of our core gameplay has remained true to its roots, so that hasn't changed a lot. One of the things we've tried to do is make the content in more digestible chunks of time.

When we originally made the game we had several sections of the game that took several hours to finish, and while that has an epic feeling to it there's also a limit on the number of people who can experience it. We want to make our content challenging, but challenging because the content is difficult to overcome. We don't want to make it challenging by requiring a huge number of people at once and requiring players to manage everything. I think that's where our philosophy has changed the most.

**For new players or players who've lapsed – they used to play *World of Warcraft* and they dropped out for whatever reason – coming in to *Cataclysm* what do you want them to take from the experience?**

**Tom Chilton** A lot of the players who played the game, think they've seen it all and done it all, at one point they fell in love with something within this world. For whatever reason, they had a really good time leveling their old characters up and I hope that when they come back they get to experience it again for the first time.

While it's true everything has changed, the game is very true to its roots and carries the soul of the original. I want those players to come back and play through it again fresh and have a really good time.

**J Allen Brack** Honestly, I'm really proud of the reworked 1-60 experience. I think it's the best *World of Warcraft* we've ever had. This expansion in particular focused on things for existing players and there's a huge litany of awesome content for existing players but also for new players *World of Warcraft* has never been better.

We've spent a lot of time working on new player experience-type things. Done a lot of playtesting to find the pain-points of the game and fix those. We went in to this expansion with the mindset of "How do we make the barrier to entry super low for new players?" There has never been a better time to start playing *World of Warcraft*.

# A MATTER OF CHARACTER

## THE COMPLEXITY OF CHARACTERS IN GAMES

WAYNE SANTOS

Games are like any media in that certain characters become iconic. Whether it's the high jinks of Jim Morrison and The Doors in music, the struggles of Harry Potter in books, or Indiana Jones in cinema, names come up that are instantly recognizable with varying degrees of knowledge on the part of the audience. In games, Pac-Man became the first pop culture icon of the medium, followed quickly by the likes of Mario and many others over the years, with Master Chief being the newest addition to the pantheon.

This puts games at an interesting crossroads in their development. As with any young medium, games struggle for approval, for legitimacy in the eyes of established culture. Games are trying to prove that they can make an emotional, cerebral or even social impression on audiences with stories and characters that rise above simple violence gratification, and some games have succeeded at this. Others, however, often the most successful titles in the industry, refute these efforts with simpler, more popular escapades and characters that take hold of the larger audience, and eventually become emblematic of how the rest of the world views gaming. For every April Ryan or Nameless One, there are a dozen Space Marines or Charming Rogues/Amoral Killers. It is a struggle that gaming faces, fighting itself to create memorable, sophisticated characters while at the same time giving the audience the tabula rasa warrior or cartoon character stand-in that they have proven time and again they want to pay for.

**The Cipher**

The first tactic, for obvious, technical limitations, has been to eliminate character almost entirely. In the beginning, graphical fidelity in gaming operated on the crudest possible level, with games like Pong where players took control of a simple, white line on the screen. Other simple shapes came and went, such as Pac-Man, one of the great iconic game characters who was little more than pizza with a slice missing from the side. Here the emphasis was on action and agency. Who you were was inconsequential. What you were doing was all that mattered, even *why* you were doing something was trivial; this was a game, these were the rules, and you played it.

These were the first avatars, simply acting as in-game agents for players who gave no thought to anything except surviving the rules of the game and getting a high score. From *Space Invaders* to *Asteroid* to *Defender*, this same sense of character as agent was carried out again and again, and it was only with Pac-Man, and his primitive cut-scenes, that some semblance of personality began to creep in. Even then, with his little vignettes in which he turned the tables against the ghosts that hounded him, there was still little more to him than "yellow mouth thing eats stuff in a maze."

Is with perhaps the first great video game character, the gaming equivalent of Mickey Mouse, that players actually found someone to identify with on more familiar emotional levels. Mario and his first appearance in *Donkey Kong*, gave players a semblance of purpose to the character; his girlfriend had been kidnapped by an ape and he wanted to rescue her. No longer was the character an abstract shape in a tunnel of light as in *Tempest*, or a simple stick figure running from one chamber to the next shooting things endlessly as in *Berzerk*. Mario actually had a goal he wanted to achieve, something beyond merely the game mechanics. It was one of the first times players could relate to the character in a meaningful way, and this was reinforced throughout the 80s with experiments like *Dragon's Lair* and Dirk the Daring's animated escapades to save the princess in the castle. But even then, this was a character in short hand, a series of characteristics, rather than a developed person, which paved way for audiences to expect more story in their games, though not necessarily more characterization.

**Is It He Or Me?**

Film, literature, theater and even dance all operate largely in the third person point of view. This is because the audience is at a remove from the action, and must have it narrated to them in some form. They are passively absorbing events as relayed to them. Even when film and literature delve into the first person point of view and climb directly into the thoughts and view of another character, it is still just that; another character. This is the essential conflict

that traditional forms of narrative and characterization have when they venture into the medium of games. In gaming, there isn't an audience, there is a participant. The creators of the game may have conceived of a particular character with a particular set of behaviors, but once the controller is in the hands of a player, it is they who are the authors of the experience, not the game developers. Because of that, players tend to identify with the events in the game as something that happens to them, rather than to the character they play. There is a reflex to think of the game as something personally experienced rather than narrated, and so, naturally, when people talk about games, it is told in the form of "I did this," and "then this happened to me," rather than "Shephard did this," or "And then this happened to April Ryan."

It is because of this that, particularly in first person shooters, a popular tactic has been to dispense with character—though not necessarily narrative structure—and rather than try to develop characterization, encourage the player to identify with the action personally. Master Chief, of *Halo* fame, is a good example of this, provided with minimal background and character traits, instead becoming an empty, armored vessel through which players can insert themselves, enjoy the power fantasy of being a space marine, and bask in the adulation of the other characters within the game for feats of superheroic bravado. Players love Master Chief not because of Master Chief himself, but because of the fact that through Master Chief, they themselves have become the hero of an epic science fiction adventure. While there are obviously books and other ancillary material that develop Master Chief's personal history for more curious fans, the vast majority of *Halo* fans don't praise Master Chief's humanity and emotional complexity, so much as their own memories of taking down the Flood with a shot gun and an energy blade. This obviously, is what gaming does best, providing not just a window into another world, but an opportunity to interact with that world. And it is more interesting for people to think of themselves as being participants in this world instead of merely observers. Mute characters, simple or undeveloped characters, these are the vehicles that the industry uses to carry that concept forward. If a player doesn't have to think about the character they are inhabiting, they simply become the character.

**They Have Feelings Too**

Though it took a while, true, traditional characterization eventually did come to games, and it happened largely on the PC at first. The genres of adventure games and role-playing games have always straddled a delicate balance of interactivity, in the form of puzzles and turn-based combat, with story-telling as a reward for overcoming those obstacles. As such, they were the closest thing the medium had to "interactive novels," first with the pure text adventures from Infocom such as *Zork* or early RPGs like *Ultima* and then point and click adventures such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* and bigger RPGs like *Baldur's Gate*. Eventually the protagonists grew much more complex and it's here that we have full blown, sophisticated characters that begin to rival those audiences expect from literature. The Nameless One, for example from *Planescape: Torment* is regularly cited as one of the most memorable characters in gaming because of the enormous depth he possesses. He begins the game as that most dreaded of clichés, an amnesiac waking up with no memory of who he is, where he is, or what he's doing, but as he uncovers more memories of his past and learns the true scope of his actions, a fully fleshed out, enormously complex character surfaces that is leagues ahead of his literal tabula rasa state at the beginning of the game.

On the other side of the coin, though again in the realm of PC games, is the traditional hero's journey as typified by April Ryan from *The Longest Journey*. April is a struggling art student in college just trying to get by with friends and school when she finds herself involved in a war between our world of science and a parallel world of magic that was separated from our own ages ago. While the bones of the story sound generic, April Ryan herself is not, fully fleshed out from the beginning as a smart but insecure young woman who eventually comes of age and learns just as much about herself as she does about the state of the world. Her arc is a classic one, surprisingly not often invoked in games where characters at the end are often the same as they were at the beginning. April Ryan however undertakes a true emotional journey that changes her in sophisticated, believable ways.

Unfortunately, simply by look at the list of characters already portrayed, a pattern begins to emerge. The most popular, iconic characters are without a doubt Pac-Man and Mario. They have the largest recognition factor with general audiences, followed by Master Chief. The Nameless One and April Ryan, while critically praised are on the fringes of popular recognition within gaming culture. In other words, simple characters seem to be more widely recognized than complex ones.

**Interactivity And Effort**

One of the primary reasons for this pattern of character recognition is simply the amount of time these games demand. *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* are arcade games, and thus their concepts and gamplay are accessible within minutes. Master Chief and the *Halo* series are polished, first person shooters that can be completed in 10 hours or less, with additional multi-player time tacked on as desired. Adventure games and role-playing games, however, can take anywhere from 20 to 100 hours, requiring commitment on the part of the player to stay with the game for the long term. However, like a novel, it is this extended time with the character that allows creators to grow and develop that character. It is the equivalent of trying to communicate character in a single issue comic book versus having 300 pages of pure text to achieve the same goal. And for a while it seemed like these complex characters were going to be relegated to the fringe of critical respect, but less commercial success. Both the public and the critics were forced to rethink that with the advent of a new style of role-playing game.

Mainstream audiences got their first taste of self-authored character

development with the debut of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* from PC stalwarts BioWare. The creators of the *Baldur's Gate* series married both the ability to choose that games were best known for with character consequence and development that traditional narratives represented. While players still couldn't truly do everything they imagined, they were also no longer confined to a linear path with only conclusion. They could also choose the outcomes of their encounters, interacting with others as a force for good or evil, and thus developing their own character who could be very different from the characters of other players. This was further developed in games like *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*, where choices made in one game carried over—along with reputations and even love interests—into sequels, giving players the sense that their decisions had real weight and impact on the game world.

These games are still RPGs, and thus have time demands that far outstrip those of other genres like action games and first person shooters. Despite that, the very real opportunity these games present to craft a character of the player's own choosing are having a real impact on audiences. *Mass Effect 2* was not just a critical success, with many outlets hailing it as a game of the year, it also sold incredibly well for BioWare. Players flocked to the game for the chance to take "Their Shephard," the main character *Mass Effect* and see how the character further developed in a sequel. This was explored to an even greater degree in *Dragon Age: Origins* where players chose the actual origin of their character, one player's hero of Ferelden might have been a lowly dwarf risen from the fringes of Dwarven society, while another was a human of noble descent, or even a gypsy-like, nomadic elf living outside of civilization entirely.

It's here that perhaps characterization in gaming has finally found its place. The interactivity of games make traditional, linear narrative and characters feel limiting. But by acknowledging the medium's greatest strength, choice, and grafting that even onto the development of characters themselves, games have found a way to engage players and make them willing to commit to the time larger stories demand. People may still prefer simple games of pure mechanics such as *Tetris* or *Pac-Man*, and they may also enjoy reductive characters that are merely stand-ins for themselves, but when presented with the opportunity to craft a character and develop it according to their choices, this manages to fulfill the necessary sense of progression for character development while still giving players the control and interactivity that is the hallmark of games. It's still an enormously complex, expensive, labor intensive task that few companies outside BioWare have tackled with the same ambition, but at least the path has been blazed and more opportunities await.

# THE ESSENTIAL INDIE GAME GUIDE

ERIN CASEY

Independent games have quickly become a pivotal part of the gaming industry; however, finding the very best indie games out there can be tricky. Because of this, I've compiled a list of some of the very best indie games, both small and big, worth checking out. This list is by no means complete, of course, but contains many of the essentials. Game on, indie enthusiasts!

**Cave Story**

*Cave Story* almost always gets mentioned whenever independent games are discussed, and for good reason: it's an amazingly engrossing video game. Daisuke "Pixel" Amaya has paired finely tuned game mechanics with a sad but sweet tale involving an amnesiac robot soldier, a power-hungry mad scientist and a race of rabbit-like creatures called Mimigas. The graphics and music are decidedly retro, but serve the simple elegance of the game. *Cave Story* is a true classic that takes a beloved genre to a near-perfect excellence.

**Knytt**

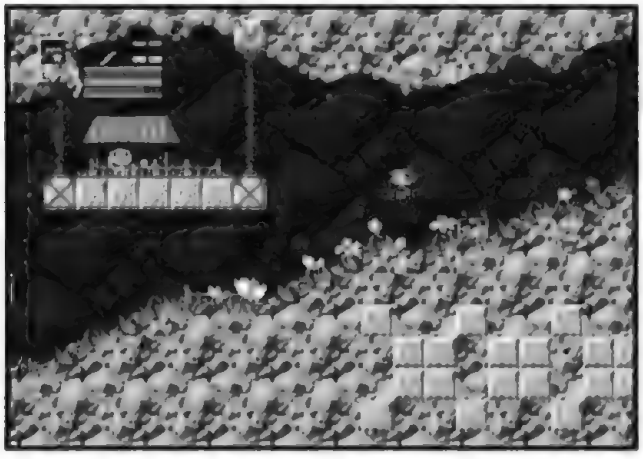
*Knytt* sets you in an alien landscape as the silent hero, seeking pieces of your broken spaceship so that you can return home. It is a lonely world, full of mysterious creatures and people whom you cannot interact with, forcing you to imagine what their lives are like, or what their purpose is. All of Nifflas's games are imbued with an incredible atmosphere (and a certain longing), but this is arguably his strongest.

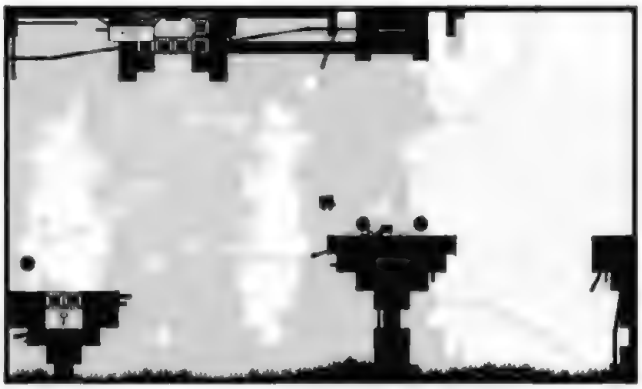
**Samorost**

Before *Machinarium* there came a little adventure game called Samorost. Samorost and its sequel take place in a surreal world that is full of mystery and wonder. In Czech, the word Samorost means "driftwood," and it's an apt title, considering the organic and mysterious feel of the game and the unique graphical style, which combines collage with cartoon animation.

**N**

What we have here is a stellar physics engine, fast-paced platform action and slick, abstract graphics rolled up into a tight little package. In *N*, it can be as fun to die as it is to execute all the sweet moves that lead up to your death. The game also comes with a level editor, which has been used extensively by its fans. *N* won the Audience Award at IGF in 2005 and has already become a hit on the DS, PSP and XBox Live Arcade. Brutally difficult, but so, so addicting.





**Super Meat Boy**

In Super Meat Boy you are a sad little skinless creature. You're girlfriend is a ... I don't know what, covered in bandages? Who's been kidnapped by you're arch nemesis ... a fetus in a mechanical body and a suit (it's hard enough keeping a straight face). This is classic arcade gaming at its best. Prepare to slip and slide your meaty self across some seriously treacherous terrain in order to rescue your beloved. Super Meat Boy is the very definition of easy-to-pick-up, hard-to-put-down.

**The Endless Forest**

*The Endless Forest* is a massively multiplayer online game where each player controls a stag with a human face (a la *Princess Mononoke*). There are no quests or goals in the game, only the endless, ethereal environments and the company of your fellow stags. Nor is there any way to communicate other than with body language and animal sounds. The graphics are lush, inspired in part by Hayao Miyazaki, and the peaceful nature of the game, devoid of violence or human communication, make this an unprecedented experience in gaming.

**Don't Look Back**

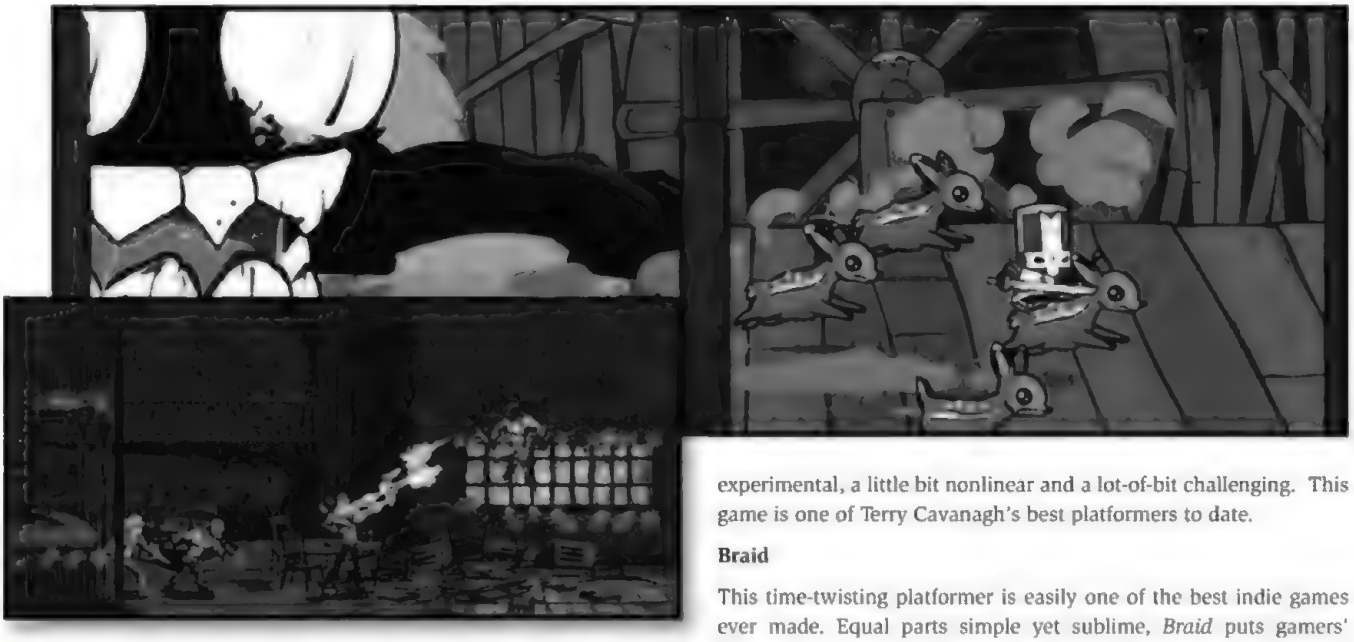
*Don't Look Back* is a Atari-style platformer designed by Terry Cavanagh. This game is a modern interpretation of the Orpheus and Eurydice Greek legend and does so with such gusto, it's one of the best minimalist interpretations (in both story and graphics) out today. *Don't Look Back* exposes Terry's dark side, plunging the player into hell-like surroundings that are both ominious and bizarre.

**Time Fcuk**

Created by designer Edmund McMillen, programmer William Good and musician Justin Karpel, *Time Fcuk is* a fairly straightforward game to describe: it's a block/switch/key puzzler with a twist of inter-dimensional-spatial-chronological tearing that rips you through layers of the same room you occupy. The game's a trip, and one of the best Flash games out there.

**Canabalt**

Ignore for just a few minutes the fact that there's an already admittedly excellent stripped down flash version of DICE's *Mirror's Edge*, because *Canabalt* – Experimental Gameplay entry from *Fathom* and *Fixel* creator Adam 'Atomic' Saltsman and musician DannyB – strips that down even further, and better. Minimalist post-apocalyptic story meets side-scrolling runner: the combination has never felt so good.



**Fathom**

*Fathom* toys with you constantly. It takes a hefty swig of the *Cave Story* juice, sharing controls, similar protagonists, distant scrolling backdrops, gorgeous levels composed of hundreds of tiles, a satisfying shmup-blaster, and bouncy, colourful pickups. There is no explanation for why you're doing all of this, but surely there will be eventually, right? The first level is wonderfully constructed as a piece of gaming, with memorable geography and a scripted collapse sequence affectively conveying the your urgent escape from... somewhere or other. If you don't know what that last part means, don't worry about it. Just play.

**Machinarium**

From Amanita Design, the creators of the brilliant *Samorost* series, comes *Machinarium*, a game so well implemented it is, without a doubt, one of the best adventure games out there. The game is devoid of the stereotypical repetitiveness, confusing map layouts and too-hard-for-its-own-good puzzles. Not to say *Machinarium* isn't difficult, but the compelling artwork and rewarding puzzles make up for the, at times, frustrating puzzles. It's clear that everyone at Amanita Design poured their heart and soul into *Machinarium*. Whether it's in the music, artwork, story or gameplay, *Machinarium* is one of those games you can't help but love.

**Limbo**

*Limbo* is unlike many puzzle games. Its story, as minimal as it may be, revolves around a young boy on his search for his missing sister. As the title implies, his search takes him to a black and white world of uncertainty: purgatory. It is a mysterious, uncertain experience that transcends most puzzle games being released today. *Limbo* is not for the faint of heart.

**VVVVVV**

The premise is simple: a ship full of six funny-looking dudes named after colors starting with the letter V (Violet, Vermillion, etc) crash lands into an unknown dimension and accidentally separates. As the ship's captain, Captain Viridian, it's your job to find the rest of your crew and fix your ship. *VVVVVV* is a little bit mind-bendy, a little bit experimental, a little bit nonlinear and a lot-of-bit challenging. This game is one of Terry Cavanagh's best platformers to date.

**Braid**

This time-twisting platformer is easily one of the best indie games ever made. Equal parts simple yet sublime, *Braid* puts gamers' brains to the test with puzzles that are challenging to the point of being frustrating, but ultimately, rewarding.

**Shank**

This colorful beat 'em up combines the best parts of *Double Dragon* with a certain grindhouse flair. Blood and guts fly as you dismember your opponents in ways that are both brutal yet slightly comical. If you love exploitation films or ultra violence then this one's a keeper.

**Castle Crashers**

*Castle Crashers* is a humorous 1-to-4-player side-scrolling beat 'em up game inspired by *Double Dragon* and similar titles. Players choose from one of 4 knights and do battle using medieval weapons and magic (other characters can be unlocked by various means). While one of the more "mainstream" indie titles out today, *Castle Crashers* never loses its quality.

**RunMan: Race Around the World**

In *RunMan* take control of a small, star-shaped hero as he pelts his way through vibrant Microsoft Paint-esque worlds. Make sure nothing can stand in his way by bouncing off practically everything in sight. Then throw in a mixture of folk, blues and jazz music to give the whole experience just that little bit more excellence, and you're on your way. Sonic, eat your heart out.

**flOw**

Born from Jenova Chen's undergraduate thesis on dynamic difficulty adjustment ("DDA") in video games, *flOw* is a landmark experiment in game development. Whereas most games rely on tension and forced challenges to keep you interested, *flOw* draws the player in by allowing them to adjust the challenge themselves through actions performed during the game. With crystalline graphics and soothing, ambient music, the result is an experience you can truly get lost in.

**Spelunky**

*Spelunky* is a cave exploration / treasure-hunting game inspired by classic platform games and roguelikes, where the goal is to grab as much treasure from the cave as possible. Every time you play the cave's layout will be different, but always addictive. A simple basis and loads of possibilities: what more could you want?

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# THE COMICS & GAMING MONTHLY BEST OF THE YEAR

## THE BEST COMICS OF 2010: IN MY BOOK

CHRIS NIKOLOPOULOS

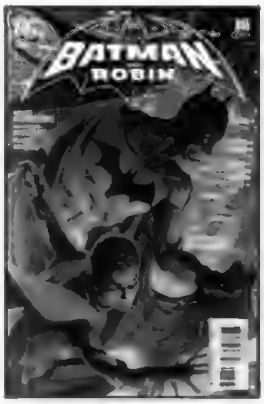
When I started working on this article, I quickly realized that it's an overwhelming task. To list the best comics in 2010 isn't as easy as one might initially conceive. To be qualified for that, you'd have to read every single comic released during the year. And if you've accomplished that feat, then I would suggest moving out and getting a job instead. Nevertheless, the best I can do for you is list comics that I personally enjoyed and suggest to anyone brave enough to listen to me.

I confess that I'm more of a Big-Two (DC and Marvel) aficionado, but I do get a kick out of reading various independent books. There are innumerable amounts of great stories out there, and many that we miss out on because the comic book industry is jam-packed. I have listed three single issues and three graphic novels that really impressed me this past year. Keep in mind that the following list is subjective and you might find yourself disagreeing with my opinions. On the other hand, you could very well agree with me entirely. Without further ado, here are my Best of 2010:





**BATMAN AND ROBIN #16 DC Comics**

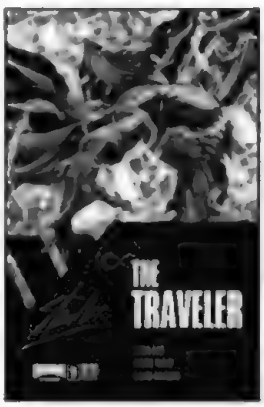



Bruce Wayne has returned and has reunited with his son Damian, currently Robin, and Dick Grayson, who took up the Batman mantle after the apparent demise of his mentor. Writer Grant Morrison wraps up his sixteen-issue run on the series, culminating storylines he began years ago. He also leaves the series with a moment that could very well change the entire Batman franchise. Bruce Wayne makes a public announcement, confessing that he has been secretly financing Batman for years. Although not a complete confession, this is as close as Bruce has ever come to outing himself as the Dark Knight. Furthermore, he initiates a worldwide organization he calls Batman Incorporated. This venture will see Batmen stationed in major cities around the world, thus expanding Bruce's heroic reach outside of the streets of Gotham City. One of the reasons Batman is my favorite hero is because of his lone wolf attitude. And although I'm half worried that going somewhat public takes away from that, I can't help but be curious and excited to see where things go from here. It's been seven decades Bruce Wayne has been around. I think it's fair to say that a change is worth the attempt.

**AGE OF HEROES (ONE-SHOT) Marvel Comics**

Being a big fan of Marvel, I had a real hard time choosing which book to highlight for this article. I went with this title because I remember feeling excited about what Marvel had in store following the Siege major event. *Age of Heroes* is a compilation of stories from various characters, such as Raptor, the Agents of Atlas, Black Widow, Hawkeye and Mockingbird, and the Thunderbolts. Every one of these mini-tales set up each individual hero's book, which were all launched as soon as Siege was over, coinciding with Marvel's new era, The Heroic Age. A different creative team worked on each story, giving this one-shot a variety of writing and artwork to satisfy almost any reader's tastes who takes the time to pick this book up.

**THE TRAVELER #01 Boom! Studios**




Even at 88 years old, Stan "The Man" Lee's still got it. I say this because after creating some of comics' most iconic characters decades ago, the legend still comes up with cool stuff. Teaming up with writing titan Mark Waid and artist Chad Hardin, Stan gives us The Traveler. You won't get the entire story out of only reading this first issue, but it definitely does enough to want to know what happens next. Randomly appearing are villains called the Split-Second Men, who have a variety of powers, such as control of electromagnetic fields. *The Traveler* shows up just in time to save a woman attacked by the villain. Not much is known of The Traveler except that he has some kind of control over space and time. He has saved different people from these Split-Second Men and has begun gaining a reputation. I enjoyed this issue mainly because Stan Lee proved that he's still capable of coming up with interesting ideas, albeit with the help of another great in Mark Waid. But Hardin's art is attractive and the dialogue is entertaining. While maintaining a serious tone, I found myself laughing at some of the things said. It seems like *The Traveler* has a sense of humor to go with the mystery behind this man.

**ALADDIN: LEGACY OF THE LOST Radical Publishing**

Most of us know Disney's version of the ancient Middle-Eastern folk tale of Aladdin. But writer Ian Edginton and artists Patrick Reilly and Stjepan Sejic give us a darker and more epic version of the story. The first thing you'll notice in these pages is the beautifully crafted artwork by both artists. It is absolutely breathtaking and with such fluidity, that you do not know when one artist is done and the other enters. We get the usual Aladdin is a thief, is tricked by a sorcerer to claim the lamp, discovers the Djin (genie), wishes to be a prince and aims for a princess' hand in marriage. But adding another Arabic folk tale character in Sinbad the Sailor adds to the story as he joins Aladdin to free the woman he loves, Soraya, from the evil sorcerer Qassim. If you're looking for a modern, mature, darker, and more epic version of Aladdin's tale, this is definitely what you seek

**OKKO: THE CYCLE OF EARTH Archaia Studio Press**

Initially released in France by popular publisher Delcourt, *Okko* was translated in English by Archaia Studio Press. *The Cycle of Earth* is the second part of a trilogy, preceded by *The Cycle of Water* and followed by *The Cycle of Air*. The story takes place in the fictional Empire of Pajan, which strongly resembles ancient feudal Japan. *Okko* is a ronin, accompanied by his companions on an adventure to the Mountains of the Seven Monasteries. Upon climbing the highest mountain, they reach the secret eighth monastery, where they enter the forbidden library and learn the darkest secrets of their enemies. The first thing I'll say is that I'm happy to see American publishers reach out overseas in order to translate their books. The stories and artwork is very different in France, but beautiful nonetheless. These translations offer non-French speaking readers the opportunity to enjoy great stories they'd otherwise miss out on. *Okko* is a book I read in its original form, and reread it again once interpreted. Both versions are well worth the time. This is a very enjoyable series.

**AMAZING SPIDER-MAN: THE GAUNTLET Marvel Comics**

To clarify this, *The Gauntlet* is a long storyline in the *Amazing Spider-Man* title that spanned issues #612 to #633. *The Gauntlet* is collected in five hardcover volumes, and I suggest every single one of them. Why? The first reason is because we get to see Spidey take on some of his greatest foes once again. Villains like Electro, Rhino, Lizard, Sandman, Mysterio, and Chameleon return to make their enemy's life a living hell. Another reason is that different writers and artists alternated with each mini-story, giving them all a unique feel to themselves while keeping the major plot moving. While most titles are monthly, *Amazing Spider-Man* is a thrice-monthly book, with generally only one week without a new issue in stores. Some might think that it's overkill, but *The Gauntlet* made me wish that a fourth week would be added to the schedule. But I digress.

With so many books accessible to us in various forms and sizes, there is no way one can get a hold of them all. I'm well aware that I missed out on so many great books that could just as easily make any Best of list as any of the ones I mentioned. But I had to draw the line somewhere and make my choices. I strongly recommend that you take the chance to look into the books from my list and even take the extra step and search for any others who might just grab your attention. The comic book industry is full of incredible tales well worth the money and the time to enjoy. Whether you prefer the more popular Big-Two titles or if your cup of tea is the independent scene, you are nonetheless treated with great storytelling and astonishing artwork. While I look back at this past year with countless books I will revisit again, I am excited for what the new year will bring to the stands.

# THE COMICS & GAMING MONTHLY BEST OF THE YEAR

## 2010'S BEST GAMES

WAYNE BANTOT

It's hard to believe that it's already been a year since *Comics & Gaming Monthly* hit the stands, and in that time, we've had an incredibly impressive year for video games. There's little doubt that when it came to every major platform for gaming, each one had some worthy titles that were absolute gems this year. So as the end of the year came, naturally the staff at C&G looked at the big spectrum of titles that had come through our doors over the last 12 months and decided it was time to select the best and recognize their achievements.

Titles were picked from every major category for every major platform, and then put to a vote amongst the writers. These are the games that, over the course of 2010, the journalists and editors at C&G have decided are the games you should consider, with honorable mention going to the runner-ups.

## THE GENRE AWARDS

The first set awards goes across all platforms and looks squarely at genre. This is the set of awards that most people should pay attention to since we're looking at games largely available on Xbox 360, Playstation 3 and the Wii in some cases with a lot of titles similarly available on the PC as well. The winners here are the ones most gamers, regardless of gaming machine, have the best chance of actually being able to go out and buy. So without further ado, let's get to it.

### BEST DOWNLOADABLE TITLE

Indie gaming has found a safe haven in the storm of AAA, big budget, retail disc releases, and it is the downloadable, online store. Xbox Live, Playstation Network and Steam have all done their part to promote unique, original games that would have been guaranteed stillborn births had they somehow managed to claw their way onto a shelf packed with *Call of Duty* and *Uncharted* games. But that's not the case, and 2010 was quite an impressive year for all manner of downloadable game.

**Nominees:**

*Scott Pilgrim Versus The World: The Game (Playstation Network, Xbox Live Arcade)*

*Shank (Playstation Network, Steam, Xbox Live Arcade)*

*Super Meat Boy (Steam, WiiWare, Xbox Live Arcade)*

*Limbo (Steam, Xbox Live Arcade)*

*Lara Croft & The Guardian Of Light (Playstation Network, Steam, Xbox Live Arcade)*

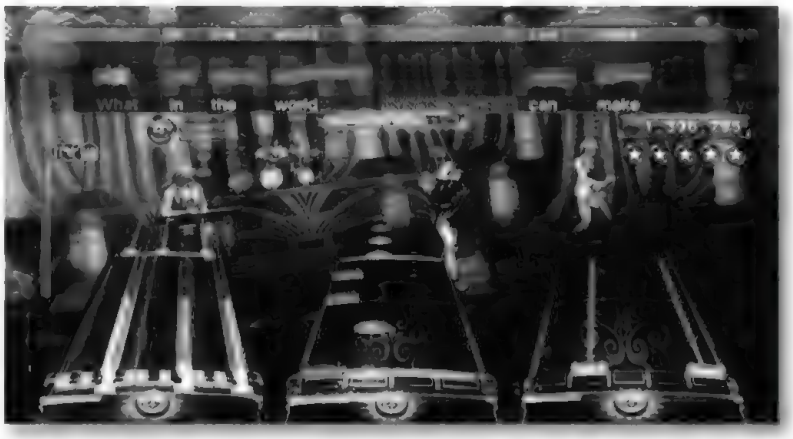
**Honorable Mention: *Scott Pilgrim versus The World: The Game***

A bizarre mix of indie comics with multi-national corporate interest. At the garage level, *Scott Pilgrim* may be developed by Ubisoft Montreal, one of the premiere developers in the world right now, but you'd never know it from playing it. The 8-bit music and old school, 2D side-scrolling beat 'em up action are a love letter to both the source material and classic retro-gaming that inspired the Canadian comic to begin with. It's fun, frantic and allows for co-op gameplay so there's a lot to like here.

**Winner: *Super Meat Boy***

In a world of check points, multiple save slots, scaling difficulty and even super-easy "automatic" game modes, along comes *Super Meat Boy*. Two buttons, one D-pad and a whole lot of insane difficulty and death hardly sound like a winning formula and yet, somehow, Team Meat has managed to pull it off. *Super Meat Boy*, like any good platforming hero, wants to do just one thing, and that's save the girl. His quest is hampered by the diabolical level design and classic, retro-levels of difficulty that will have players dying over, and over and over again until they attain that 80s zen state of perfect hand-eye coordination combined with memorization. It's a feat rarely demanded contemporary gaming, but Team Meat's genius level design, nods to other indie gamers with cameos and even the ability to watch your multitudes of past deaths play out simultaneously all create one of the most compelling—and masochistic—downloadable experiences of the year.

## BEST RHYTHM GAME



We've come a long way from the glory days of rhythm and music games.The former ubiquity of *DDR* madness in arcades and plastic guitar riffing at home have become increasingly scarce as the genre loses popularity. Maybe it's over-saturation, maybe it really was just a fad, but whatever the case, even if the mainstream no longer flocks to the genre the way it used to, some of the best rhythm games ever seen actually went into retail release this year. If you're still interested in the genre, you'll find it's alive and kicking, even if not selling as well as it used to.

**Nominees:**

*Def Jam Rapstar (Playstation 3, Wii, Xbox 360)*

*Rock Band 3 (Playstation 3, Wii, Xbox 360))*

*Guitar Hero: Warriors of Rock (Playstation 3, Wii, Xbox 360)*

*DJ Hero 2 (Playstation 3, Wii, Xbox 360)*

*Dance Central (Xbox 360)*

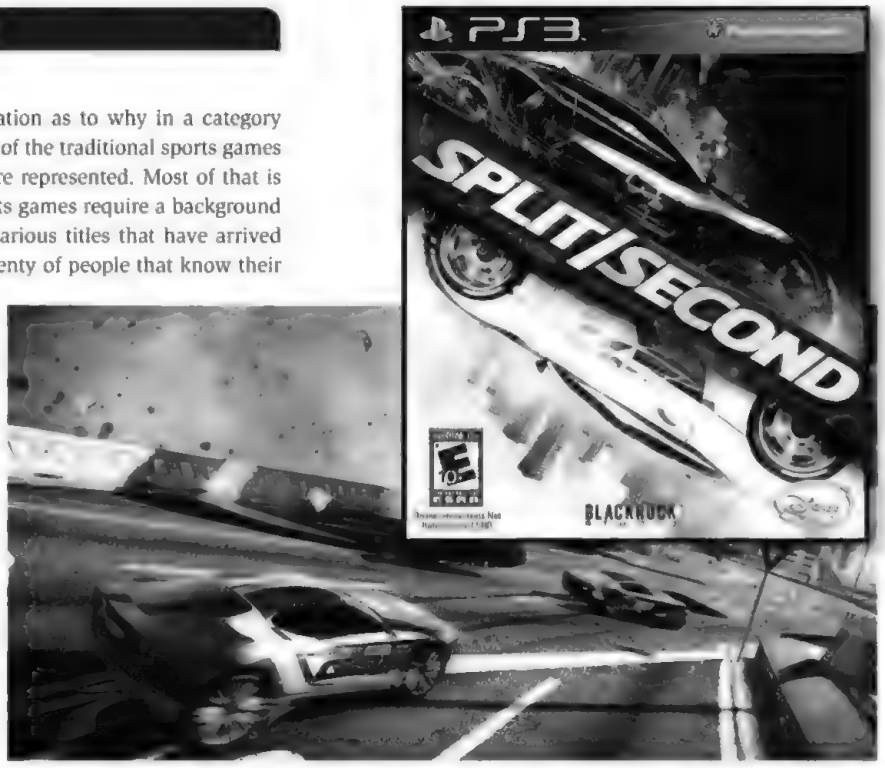
**Honorable Mention: *Def Jam Rapstar***

While *Rock Band 3* got the lion's share of the votes, there was still room for some support of this rap-based rhythm game. Dancing, rock, metal karaoke and even the club worlds of DJs have all gotten some representation over the years, and it was finally rap's turn to not just get done, but done right. A broad mix of songs from the genre made it an essential title for anyone looking to live out their rap star—as opposed to rock star—fantasies.

**Winner: *Rock Band 3***

With *Rock Band 3*, Harmonix finally created the sock to stuff in the mouths of hecklers that urged plastic instrument enthusiasts to "learn to play a real instrument." The introduction of Pro-Mode for drums, keyboards and guitars has introduced a new and intimidating level of achievement to the series. Aside from the remarkable technical achievement creating a game that can read both real and fake guitar riffing, the actual game has received a drastic design overhaul, making Quick Play mode both accessible and easy, and providing one of the best setlists for a music game on disc. Provided you were born in the 80s. The improvement and evolution of *Rock Band 3* makes it easily the best rhythm game of the year as, aside from dancing, it covers just about every aspect of music you'd want it to.

## BEST SPORTS/RACING GAME




There will probably be some speculation as to why in a category talking about sports and racing, none of the traditional sports games like Hockey, Basketball or Football are represented. Most of that is down to a question of expertise. Sports games require a background of experience in the genre and the various titles that have arrived over the years, and while we have plenty of people that know their driving and extreme sports titles, traditional team based sports is not an area we have dedicated coverage for. With that out of the way, these are the sports titles we did play and had the experience to evaluate.

**Nominees:**

*Gran Turismo 5 (Playstation 3)*

*Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit (PC, Playstation 3, Wii, Xbox 360))*

*Split Second: Velocity (PC, Playstation 3, Xbox 360)*

*Skate 3 (Playstation 3, Xbox 360)*

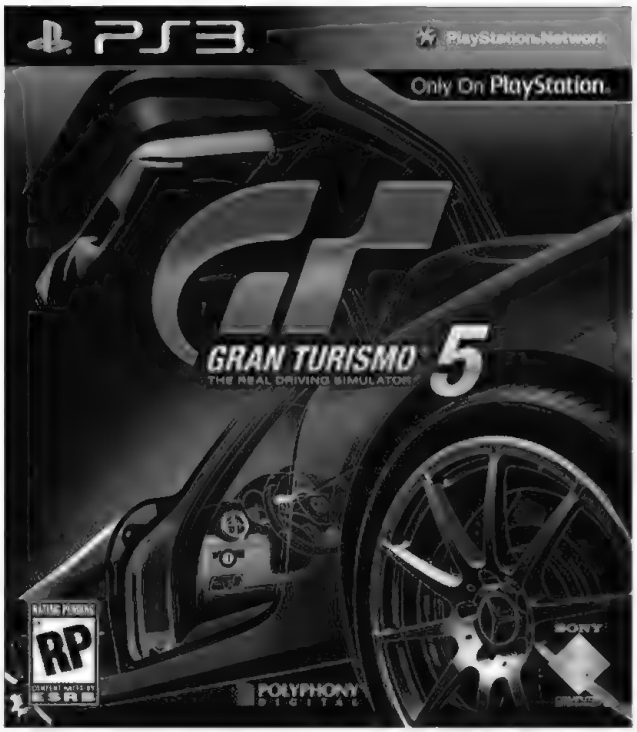
*Sports Champions (Playstation 3)*

**Honorable Mention: *Split Second: Velocity***

If *Gran Turismo 5* is the most realistic driving experience available to gamers, *Split Second: Velocity* is the craziest. Taking the bold approach of re-conceiving vehicular combat to mean "drivers can detonate buildings behind them to alter the race course," the game is an exercise in both stunt driving and adjusting to dramatic upheavals in the track inflicted by other drivers. There wasn't another racer on the market that took this same dramatic turn, and it's one of the more original—and visceral—race experiences available this year. Winner

**Winner: *Gran Turismo 5***

While *Forza Motorsport 3*, made waves and its upcoming sequel is claiming to be the most realistic driving simulator when it releases, *GT5* is still the game to own for the moment. A massive list of over 1000 cars, and the best driving physics currently available are jammed into a list of activities of runs the gamut from Kart Racing to Rally to NASCAR. The *GT* series has never been this big, it's almost too big, but take away the A-Spec, B-Spec and special events and you're still left with jaw dropping visuals—at least with premium cars—and the kind of attention to car handling physics that is still unmatched. When played with a good quality steering wheel, the masterful force feedback makes the game the single best driving simulator for console owners. And really, how many of us will ever have the opportunity to drive a Bugatti Veyron otherwise?




## BEST ADVENTURE GAME

It's been a long time coming, but the adventure game genre is making something of a comeback. A lot of classic point and click style adventure games are making their way to downloadable stores, but even in the retail disc sector, there have been some surprise hits. 2010 saw some original takes on the genre for all the consoles, and with *LA Noire* giving us some good old fashioned investigation next year, things are looking up. Hopefully 2010 wasn't just a blip on the radar and the momentum will continue in the years to come.

**Nominees:**

*Heavy Rain (Playstation 3)*

*Alan Wake (Xbox 360))*

*Darksiders (PC, Playstation 3, Xbox 360)*

*Silent Hill: Shattered Memories (Wii)*

*Calling (Wii)*

**Honorable Mention: *Alan Wake***

*Alan Wake* is a quality title that deserved better than to be ignored simply because it wasn't a first person shooter on the Xbox 360. A gloomy, supernatural/psychological thriller about a writer struggling with the darker side of his own creativity, *Alan Wake*, manages to provide unique light/shadow based gameplay, and marries it to a tense story in the grand tradition of Stephen King. If you own an Xbox 360 and are looking for something a little more substantial, you need to buy this.

**Winner: *Heavy Rain***

*Heavy Rain* was either the most original adventure game in years, or simply *Indigo Prophecy HD* if you were familiar with the works of French developer Quantic Dream. Regardless of your past experience however, *Heavy Rain* was also clearly a game where choices mattered, drama was paramount, and players often found themselves on the edge of their seat or outright cringing over the events that unfolded in this starkly grim game about a man trying to save his son from a serial killer. There have been many debates about mechanics, the acting, even the story itself, but one thing every can agree on is that these are debates worth having, and you need to play the game in order to participate.

## BEST ROLE-PLAYING GAME

The genre of RPGs is actually in pretty good shape these days, though the pendulum has swung from a traditional console allegiance to Japan and over to the West. The mighty Japanese RPG has lost quite a bit of its luster these days, while developers like Bethesda and BioWare have been carving out new standards that audiences expect everyone else to follow. With the exception of one title in our list, every other game has one overriding mechanic to offer the prospective player; choice.

**Nominees:**

Mass Effect 2 (PC, Xbox 360)

Dragon Age: Origins (PC, Playstation 3, Xbox 360))

Fallout: New Vegas (PC, Playstation 3, Xbox 360)

Final Fantasy XIII (Playstation 3, Xbox 360)

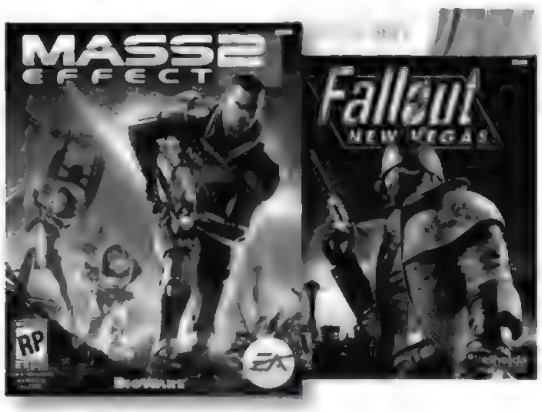
Fable III (Xbox 360)

**Honorable Mention: *Fallout: New Vegas***

Bethesda handed the reigns of *Fallout* over to Obsidian and the result is a welcome return to the west coast, with the same satirical edge *Fallout* fans came to love in the first games. The setting is now New Vegas, but, as with any Bethesda game, that setting is merely a large sandbox in which the players can ignore the main quest entirely and simply wander into all sorts of trouble that they uncover themselves across the vast Nevada desert. The game is blemished by the usual bugs and glitches that Bethesda is notorious for, but patches in recent months have been slowly weeding those out.

**Winner: *Mass Effect 2***

This was an easy win. In the year 2010, no other game available took the idea of persistent choice to the same level as *Mass Effect 2*, even allowing choices made in the original *Mass Effect* to shape the story as it unfolded in the sequel. The adventures of Shephard continued as he (or she) worked to defend the galaxy against the return of the Reapers. While some JRPGs, such as *Xenosaga* did allow for certain data from previous games to carry over into sequels, they didn't actually allow choices to effect the story. In *Mass Effect 2*, whatever you did, whoever you allowed to live, die, or love, all of those decisions from the first game played out in the second. And the second just happened to also have one of the best stories seen in the year. It's the complete package, with compelling gameplay, stories, characters and mechanics that ultimately set new standards that the rest of the industry should consider following.




## BEST FIRST PERSON SHOOTER GAME

When it comes to the FPS, gamers really are spoilt for choice. It's the dominant genre of our time, and a dozen new games are the absolute minimum in any year. This year in particular saw quite a few big names release sequels for their respective franchises, and in many ways, all of them delivered. Whether it's futuristic, contemporary or historic shooting, there was just about something for everyone that wants to run around with a gun.

**Nominees:**

*Call of Duty: Black Ops (PC, Playstation 3, Wii, Xbox 360)*

*Halo: Reach (Xbox 360))*

*Bioshock 2 (PC, Playstation 3, Xbox 360)*

*Battlefield: Bad Company 2 (PC, Playstation 3, Xbox 360)*

*M.A.G. (Playstation 3)*

**Honorable Mention: *Battlefield: Bad Company 2***

There were bigger titles that came out this year, but that doesn't mean the ones with smaller profiles didn't do anything worthwhile. *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* crafted a decent single-player campaign with a phenomenal multi-player component. Conquest Mode is back and better than ever, combined with the destructible environments that are a hallmark of the series, making that perfect piece of shelter in a house only a temporary escape until someone with a tank brings the whole thing down around your ears. It may not have been the most evenly designed FPS this year, but what it did bring to the table is something other developers should look at.

Winner: Halo: Reach

*Call of Duty* may be the new king in town when it comes to selling the greatest number of copies across three separate platforms, but Halo: Reach proves once again that there's a reason Bungie redefined the FPS for console players. A solid single player campaign with some genuinely dramatic moments for franchise fans, it also allows for a complete co-op experience of the campaign, something that few FPS games are willing to do, even when it was pioneered in the first *Halo: Combat Evolved*. Add onto that the monstrous online component complete with the Forge for tweaking levels, and Bungie's usual bang up job of balancing and—yes, ripping off—the perks and leveling system of *COD* games and you get an extremely robust shooter that satisfies just about everyone.

## BEST ACTION GAME

C&G defines an action as one that is primarily 3rd person, with gameplay mechanics not solely defined by shooting, although shooting can certainly play a major element. They can be single-player and/or multi-player but the important thing is this is a game with a winning formula of putting players in situations and activities that go above and beyond basic jumping and/or shooting and set a new standard for the year.

**Nominees:**

*Red Dead Redemption (Playstation 3, Xbox 360)*

*Bayonetta (Playstation 3, Xbox 360)*

*God of War III (Playstation 3)*

*Dead Rising 2 (PC, Playstation 3, Xbox 360)*

*Splinter Cell: Conviction (PC, Xbox 360)*

**Honorable Mention:** ***God of War III***

*God of War III* is an exercise in vicious, gory spectacle that starts up with all cylinders firing and never lets up. Ever. From the opening half hour's spectacular fight on an ascending Titan to the journey from the bowels of Hades to the pristine halls of Olympus, *GOW3* provides pitch perfect melee action expertly broken up by puzzles in all the right places. This is a game that manages to satisfy the blood lust of every adrenaline junky. Just don't expect any kind of thought provoking themes or characters like our winner, Red Dead Redemption contained.

**Winner:** ***Red Dead Redemption***

Rockstar San Diego did what many thought was impossible. They made a game about riding horses and shooting guns that weren't full automatic rifles actually fun. *Red Dead Redemption* took players and put them in a fictional recreation of the Old West's twilight years that perfectly captured the flavor of a lawless land, and drove home the somber theme that you can't run away from your past. When John Marston finds his family held hostage by the US government unless he tracks down and eliminates members of his former outlaw gang, he takes players on a journey across all the tropes of the Old West, lovingly recreated in interactive form. It had been done before in Neversoft's Gun back in back in 2005, but not with this sense of scope, polish, authenticity or audaciousness. The satire of Rockstar's Houser brothers shines through, but romance of the West is never insulted, merely integrated into an interactive experience unlike any other this year.

## THE CONSOLE AWARDS

This is pretty straightforward. Four major gaming platforms, each one with exclusive titles, and we pick the best that each one offered. Whether you stuck to your PC, your Playstation 3, your Wii or Xbox 360, there was something for each machine that you had to own this year. And if you had multiple machines, that made your dilemma that much worse since there's only so much money—and more importantly, time—to devote to gaming. But regardless of your platform(s) of choice, it was a good year for gamers.

## BEST PC GAME

The PC has obviously lost a lot of its hold over the industry. Rampant piracy is the chief cause of that, but then along come concepts like MMOs where people have to pay anyway in order to access the gameplay and the humble PC manages to keep on going. Well, that and, unlike consoles, the technology improves every year, as opposed to generations. Like most years, PC gamers had a steady stream of smaller titles which had to make room for some massive ones.

**Nominees:**

*Civilization 5*

*Starcraft II: Wings of Liberty*

*Greed Corp.*

*Alien Swarm*

*Tropico 3*

**Honorable Mention:** ***Alien Swarm***

*Alien Swarm* seems like a bit of a surprise until the words "developed by Valve" enter the conversation, and then things start making a lot more sense. A top down shooter about marines exploring a colony infested by aliens, the game is not just smartly designed, but extremely open to modding, with a free software developers kit available to anyone who purchased the game on Valve's Steam online store. It's just another testament to Valve that they love their fans enough that said fans are allowed to get their hands directly on the code and start adding content themselves.

**Winner:** ***Starcraft II: Wings of Liberty***

The short form is, it was pretty much worth the wait. The original *Starcraft* turned into a literal international sport in countries like Korea, with a consummate blend of tactics, balance and speed that gave it a life of its own, like chess on cocaine. That was way back in 1998 and 12 years later, a successor finally arrived. Contrary to fears of a truncated campaign when it was announced that the plan was for three "episodes" to tell the story, *SC2* featured a large, robust campaign that took players through a variety of missions, and paved the way for using the new units and tactics associated with them in the multi-player that everyone wanted to get their hands on. The game isn't going to cure cancer, but if you just wanted the very best real time strategy game currently available, this is it.

## BEST Wii GAME

Next year all eyes will be on the 3DS, but for now, the Wii has still carved out a massive space for itself as the current bestselling console of this generation. While there's no question that the Wii is the defacto family console to own, Nintendo also has a legacy of gaming legends in its stable, and quite a lot of them were re-released this year to duke it out for the top spot.

**Nominees:**

*Epic Mickey*

*Kirby's Epic Yarn*

*Donkey Kong Country Returns*

*Metroid: Other M*

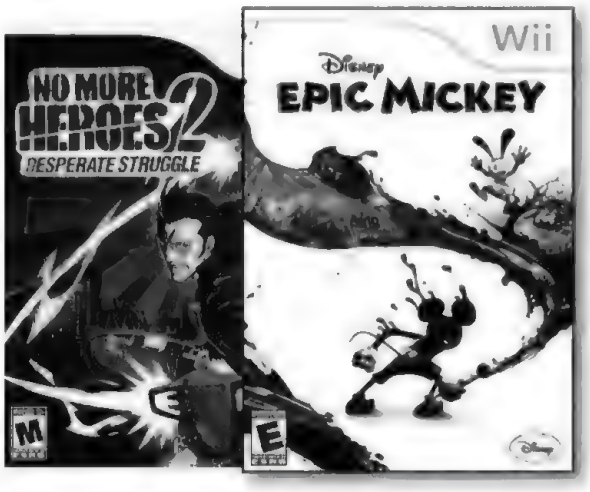
*No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle*

**Honorable Mention:** ***No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle***

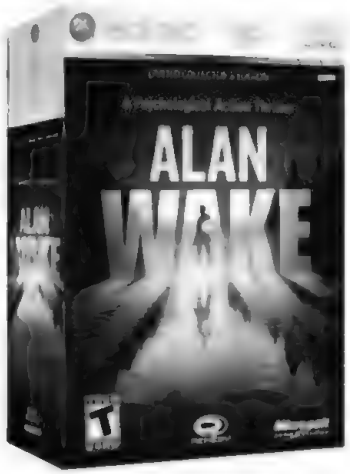
Japan might not hold the same sway with gamers' hearts that it did in years past, but that doesn't mean that they can't still crank out a mean, kooky game with that distinctive cultural insanity that only they have. It's a pleasant surprise but our runner up is one of those games. *No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle* continues the antics of Travis Touchdown in Santa Destroy, and it retains all the eccentricity that *Suda51*, creator of *Killer 7* is famous for. It's a love letter to Otaku culture and gaming history with 8-bit gaming sequences, giant robot summoning and saving your game by hitting the nearest toilet stall to sit on the porcelain throne. This is absolute, no-holds barred, Japanese craziness in game design, and the world is a better place for it.

**Winner:** ***Epic Mickey***

No other game took quite the chance that *Epic Mickey* has. Trusting one of the biggest, iconic characters of the Happiest Kingdom On Earth to a man that made a career out of giving people the choice to shoot a guy in a head, or sneak by, hack an automated turret and let machines do it for you. Warren Spector is not immediately known for producing conventional warm, fuzzy feelings in his audience, but that's precisely why he was chosen for the job. *Epic Mickey* is not about the inoffensive, smiling icon with almost no personality that is the Mickey Mouse of today. Instead, players get a tour of both Mickey's history and that of the Walt Disney company itself as forgotten characters and concepts come back at Mickey with a vengeance for a careless act in his younger days. It's a platformer with a lot of choice, something you just don't see, and it's one of the most original games of the year.



## BEST XBOX 360 GAME




The 360 had, without a doubt, a stellar, 2010. It got the ball rolling with hit after hit as early as January, and ended the year with the biggest selling game peripheral of the season in the form of Kinect. It's got all the bases covered for hardcore, mainstream and casual audiences, and it doesn't look like the momentum is going to fade anytime soon. 2010 is going to be a tough year for the 360 to beat, as so many varied titles came out. But that just gives the creators of the big white (now black) box something to shoot for.

**Nominees:**

*Mass Effect 2*

*Halo: Reach*

*Fable III*

*Alan Wake*

*Splinter Cell: Conviction*

**Honorable Mention:** ***Mass Effect 2***

While *ME2* didn't have the same sheen of originality to it that *Alan Wake* did (it is, after all, a sequel), it was the first big hit for the Xbox 360 back on January 26th, and nearly a year later, people are still talking about it. RPGs aren't so common these days, and of the games available, few are in science fiction settings, but if anyone was going to get it right, it was going to be the same guys that made *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and they didn't just deliver a game that lived up to the original, it surpassed it.

**Winner:** ***Alan Wake***

It was surprising, but Master Chief did not take the crown for best 360 game at C&G. The majority vote went to the dark, super-natural adventures of a writer coming to terms with the fact that his vacation to deal with writer's block results in a kidnapped wife, and recovering pages to a novel he has no knowledge of actually writing. It has to be stressed once again, that it is a shame that *Alan Wake*'s non-FPS gameplay proved to be such a turn-off to the mainstay 360 crowd. Hopefully this won't have a permanent impact for the adventure game on the 360, and more people will give this game a try as it was one of the most unique and daring titles to grace the 360 this year.

## BEST PLAYSTATION 3 GAME

Was 2010 the Year of the Playstation 3? Some would say "Yes," based on the number of quality games that came out, some would say "No," based on its trailing, 3rd place performance in the console wars. But one thing that can't be denied is that people that owned a PS3 had access to a lot of quality games this year. Like clockwork every month or two a new title came out that had a wide variety of gamers excited for their particular genre. And now, like Microsoft, the Sony has thrown its hat into the motion control race with Playstation Move, so the stage is set for a very interesting—and potentially casual—explosion of gaming next year amongst all three console manufacturers.

**Nominees:**

*God of War III*

*Gran Turismo 5*

*Heavy Rain*

*Yakuza 3*

*Modnation Racers*

**Honorable Mention:** ***God of War III***

If Heavy Rain was all about originality, *GOW3* was about taking established mechanics and polishing to a razor-sharp, mirror-like sheen. There wasn't anything particularly new added to the conclusion of the deicidal trilogy, but what was there was now pitch perfect in presentation, execution and pacing. There was never a dull moment in this game, a claim that very few titles can make, and it managed to close off a trilogy that didn't have one weak link in its chain. *God of War III* is one of the most polished, mechanically and technically perfect action games of the year, even if it did nothing new.

**Winner:** ***Heavy Rain***

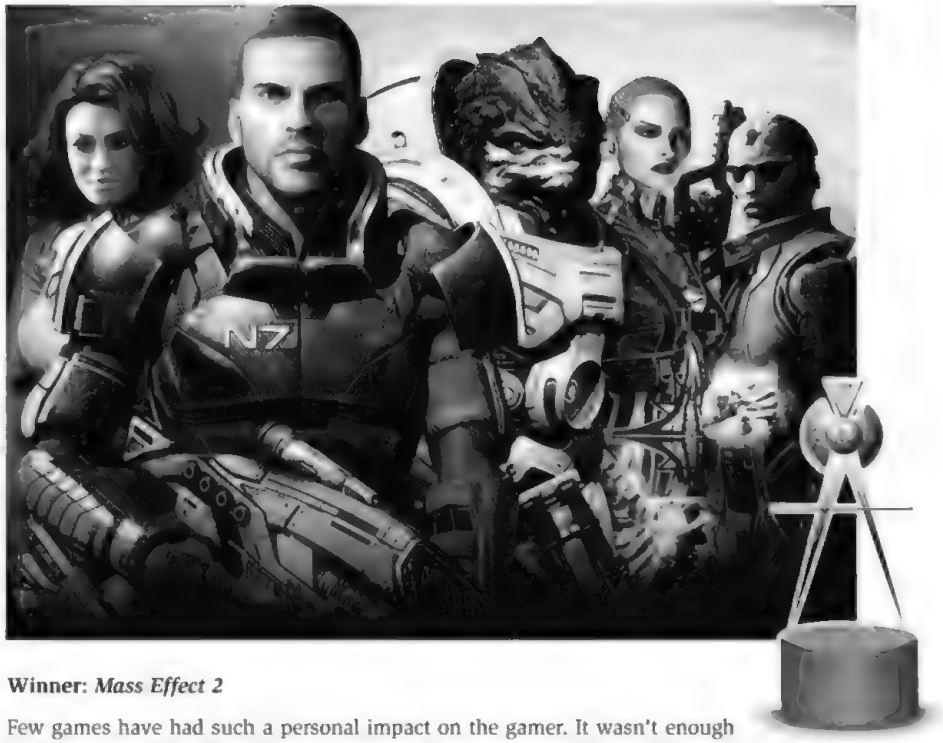
It would seem that C&G is populated mostly by adventure fans judging from the way the voting went. *Heavy Rain* weighs in as the PS3 game of the year by virtue of its gorgeous presentation, startling narrative, and ability to genuinely get its hooks into the heads of players and make them give a Very Large Damn about what was happening to Ethan Mars. The ability to choose different actions and see different outcomes from various encounters played a large part in the game's daring production, but most crucial of all was the very real possibility that any of the main characters could die, with the story simply accounting for this and moving on to a new conclusion. Few games in the PS3 library took the chances that *Heavy Rain* did, and it succeeded.

## THE GAME OF THE YEAR

Of course, there can be only one. Out of all the games that have come and gone over the year, there's going to be one game that you tell everyone, "Yes, you need to go out, get this game and play the hell out of it." This is the C&G pick.

**Honorable Mention: *Red Dead Redemption***

RDD wasn't just a great action game, it was a way for people to visit a world they'd only read about in history books. It was a way to live out scenes viewed time and again in Clint Eastwood movies. It was also a way to get into the gritty boots of a man trying to erase is past and see a world of startlingly beautiful sunsets and ugly human brutality. *Red Dead Redemption* was a game, but it was also more than that, and was a surprising turn for a company that made most of its reputation from black, satirical comedy in titles like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Bully*. That's not to say that *Red Dead Redemption* couldn't be funny, but in this case, funny and crazy antics weren't the point. If next year's *LA Noire* is a continuation of this trend, we have a lot to be excited about.




**Winner: *Mass Effect 2***

Few games have had such a personal impact on the gamer. It wasn't enough that the player's decision from the original carried over, each game for each player was a different experience. What your Commander Shepard did could have been radically different than what another player's Shepard did, making the game a deeply personal one, and taking choice and consequence to levels never before seen. *Mass Effect 2* is the hallmark of a new kind of game, one of persistent choice and far reaching consequences. It's a hint of where games could go given the time and resources, and it is backed up by some of the most well realized characters in console gaming with the production values to do the story justice. This is the kind of game design that creates new paradigms, and hopefully BioWare won't be the only ones doing it in the foreseeable future.

## DEVELOPER OF THE YEAR

While it's all well and good to praise games, something has to be said for the massive teams that work on them. The end result of a fantastic game is hours of gameplay for we, the players, but it means years of work for the developers behind the scenes. There are a lot of amazing developers in the industry, and with any luck we'll see yet more emerge in the years to come. But in 2010, there was one developer who really showed off what was possible in games, and we are compelled to recognize them for it.

**Honorable Mention: Platinum Games**

Platinum Games has done the unthinkable and somehow managed to crank out two high quality action games within the same year. Both *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish* came out in 2010, and both of them are brilliant examples of the kind of elegant, brutal, agile action game mechanics that made Japan the darling of gamers for so many years. The industry has not been kind to Japan of late, with old standbys such as Square-Enix, Capcom and even Namco-Bandai disappointing many with games that feel out of step with contemporary sensibilities, but Platinum has kept the flame of Japanese game design alive with some astonishing quality in a short amount of time. With any luck, they'll keep the momentum going in the years to come.

**Winner: BioWare**

Being a Canadian publication, we are happy and proud to say that the good doctors based out in Edmonton are easily at the helm of one of the best developers in the world right now. It's not just enough that they released our game of the year, they consistently release great games every year. *Dragon Age: Origins* came at the tail end of 2009, mere months before *Mass Effect 2* hit, and in 2011, they're releasing *Mass Effect 2* on the PS3, *Dragon Age 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, in addition to working on a Star Wars: The *Old Republic* MMO via their Austin studio. BioWare is a developer that has established a remarkable pedigree over the years, with a consistent commitment to making games more than just mindless, escapist entertainment, pushing the entire medium forward with a combination of good writing, high production values and brilliant design.

# "WHAT HAPPENED TO INFINITY WARD?"

## A 2010 HOLIDAY TALE

ERIC WEISS

Like any good Jewish family living in North America, mine has crafted a set of not-so-time-honored Christmas traditions involving movies – this year, a rented version of *The Town* – and a visit to somebody else's house for dinner. In 2010, that means that I spent a significant portion of Christmas day playing a friend's newly gifted copy *Call of Duty: Back Ops*.

I'm not the world's biggest *Call of Duty* fan – I tend to prefer *Dragon Age* – but *Black Ops* is interesting because it was a bit of a test case for the industry. It's the *first Call of Duty* game to hit shelves in the wake of the Activision/Infinity Ward fiasco and it's forced us to ask some tough questions about video games as an artistic medium.

"What's more important for the game?" mused Lazard Capital Markets analyst Colin Sebastian in November. "Is it the franchise itself or is it the developer behind the game? If Treyarch can sell just as many units as Infinity Ward, then that would mean the franchise is more important."

For a naïve idealist/game blogger like myself, it's tough to cling to the notion that artistic integrity will be rewarded when Activision spends as much time in the courthouse as the studio. That's why it's refreshing to step back and spend an afternoon with friends who like games but don't spend the majority of their waking hours completely immersed in the news wire.

"I think unless you follow the play by play in this industry, you probably aren't even aware of the drama," continued Sebastian, and it's hard to argue with his logic. *Black Ops* crossed the $1 billion plateau in record time and proved that brand recognition is enough to carry the day at the retail counter.

That brings me back to Christmas day, where playing split-screen multiplayer in a basement with a half-dozen other people gave me a fresh perspective on the issue. I now know that Sebastian is only half right, and there's still cause for optimism entering the New Year.

In my admittedly non-representative Yuletide sample, nobody else knew anything about Activision's ongoing legal troubles and they weren't going to let a trivial thing like California labor law interfere with an afternoon death match. Even so, every member of our Christmas party wanted to know one thing: "What happened to Infinity Ward?"

I was able to relay the answer, but it's telling that casual *Call of Duty* fans are asking the question in the first place. It means that people know that Infinity Ward made *Modern Warfare 2* and – more importantly – that they didn't make the follow up. Treyarch was able to overcome that apprehension, but that says more about the talent level at Treyarch than it does about the value of the label.

Bobby Kotick insists that brand is everything, but I suspect that he's not giving his customers enough credit. Fans aren't so oblivious that they ignore the logos that flash on the screen every single they fire up the Xbox, and top developers have cultural weight that exceeds the games they produce.

I know that because – after hearing the sordid tale of litigious woe – all of my friends asked when Respawn Entertainment's first game would be available. Even Bobby Kotick would have to admit that driving dozens of talented employees to a rival studio is bad for business if it leads directly to a sales boon for a competitor.

So in a roundabout and rather ironic way, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* injected some hope into my holiday season. The average consumer may not know that Infinity Ward is in shambles, but they know that Infinity Ward made good games, and there are still plenty of everyday players that will give the original team the credit they deserve. That's a healthy omen, and it'd be nice to see that trend continue beyond 2011.

# THE CULTURE OF GAMING

WAYNE SANTOS

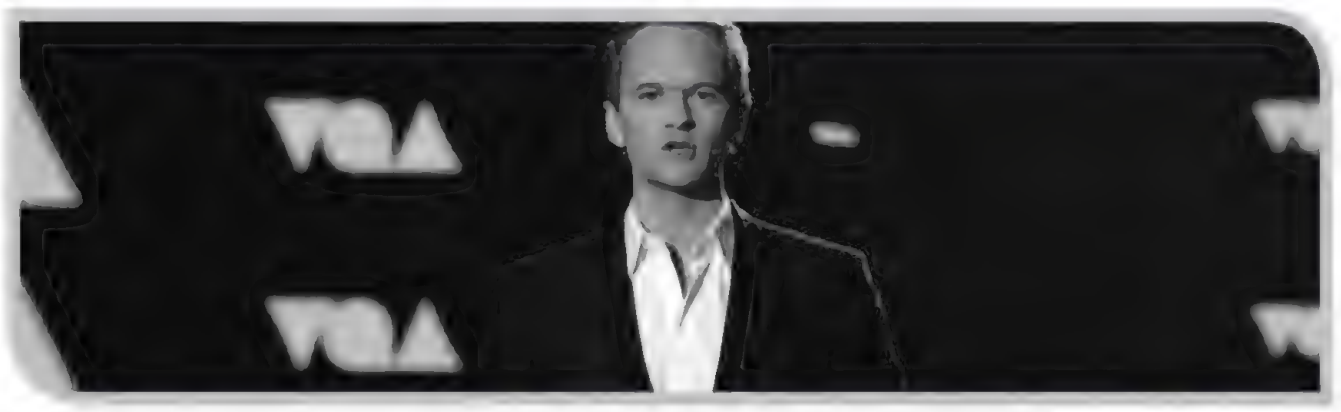
Every medium has a culture of some sort. When you talk about books, there are legions of science fiction and fantasy fans, further broken up into subcultures like "Twihards." In cinema, there are the art house aficionados, and in music, there's an entire gamut of audiences from classical to jazz to pop music. The same is also true of gaming, with one critical difference; both the media on the outside and the media that concentrates on gaming have little to no respect for this audience.

This was no more apparent than in December's VGA awards. And for me, it was a disheartening thing to see. I'm not thirteen years old. I don't believe the characters in videogames are real, and I don't spend time in the classroom drawing pictures of space marines with guns and quietly making "boom" noises with my mouth as I draw explosions. But if the VGA awards are any indication of how the gaming media views its audience, they believe that all of us are exactly that kind of person, and figure the best way to entertain is to "make with the boom boom and flash flash flash." The VGAs were an exercise in juvenile, cartoonish antics that attempted to recognize the efforts of teams of mature men and women with enormous creative and technical talent.

It seems that despite the fact that games are of the most successful forms of entertainment in the 21st century, there's a general belief that the audience is nothing but teenagers. This isn't a state that I believe is going to last forever, but it does get me to wondering, what is it going to take to change? The Academy Awards for cinema, which can justifiably be accused from year to year of being crass or commercial, still treat their artists and audience with dignity. The Pulitzer and even the World Fantasy Award give the writers and their audiences respect.

That's not to say the industry is entirely without a more respectable source of recognition for the talents involved in the medium. Recently the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences announced that in February, Dr. Ray Muzyka and Dr. Greg Zeschuk, the founders of BioWare would be the newest inductees into the hall of fame. The Academy itself was formed in 1996 to be a peer-reviewed jury of professionals within the industry. It is the gaming industry's equivalent of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, but unlike that more established organization, the AIAS does not receive the same kind of mainstream media coverage. Instead the Spike Video Game Awards, which is essentially the gaming version of the MTV Awards, gets the television coverage and clearly aims at what they perceive to be a more attention-deficit disorder audience.

Gaming is coming of age. It is an everyday facet of life, and it is rapidly becoming an entertainment medium of choice for many people across a broad spectrum of age and general interests. The culture of gamers—both professionally and in a fan sense—deserve more respect from their own media outlets than the assumption that animated characters and attractive women are the only ways to focus our attention on the people that make the product we enjoy so much. The AIAS and its efforts to recognize their own talent is a great step towards this, but it doesn't enjoy the same corporate sponsorship and coverage of a television station like MTV or Spike TV. Hopefully this is something that will change in the coming years, because frankly, gaming can't retain the juvenile perception it currently has it wants to do what comics did and gain more legitimacy outside its fanbase.



# GOING ALL-IN

JUSTIN AMIRKHANI

This past year I noticed a disturbing trend in myself, much longer play sessions in a few select games with little to no progress towards completing them. *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, *Red Dead Redemption* and *Fallout: New Vegas* all consumed a disproportionate amount of my time consider I only beat one of those 3 games.

Gambling made its way in to gaming this year in a very big way. *Black Ops* introduced wager matches that let you bet on yourself like a crooked boxer, *Red Dead* wouldn't be the same without its blackjack or liar's dice, and *New Vegas* took players all the way to Sin City itself.

Good game design is all about creating a satisfying feedback loop of risk and reward for the player. It's that teetering feeling where you're not sure if you can win, but you know it's always worthwhile to try. This sort of design is what keeps people playing even when outclassed by opponents or facing a seemingly insurmountable challenge. Players recognize the game wouldn't present a problem that couldn't be solved and so they push forward.

Gambling follows these same fundamentals; players always feel like there's a chance the next roll of the dice could win them big and so they keep pushing, even when deep in the hole. Applying the mechanics of gambling to existing games offers designers an easy way to achieve a nearly perfect equilibrium of risk and reward because the principles of conventional gambling structures have already been perfected.

*Call of Duty: Black Ops*' wager matches are a prime example of this, mirroring a traditional betting schema the game provides players incentive to push hard and win big. I can't count the number of times I've seen my bankroll drop to nothing after a few awry One In The Chamber matches, but I never recall feeling defeated or out of the running. Even when forced to go back to traditional multiplayer (blech!) to earn money for my newfound addiction, the sense that riches were just around the corner was never lost.

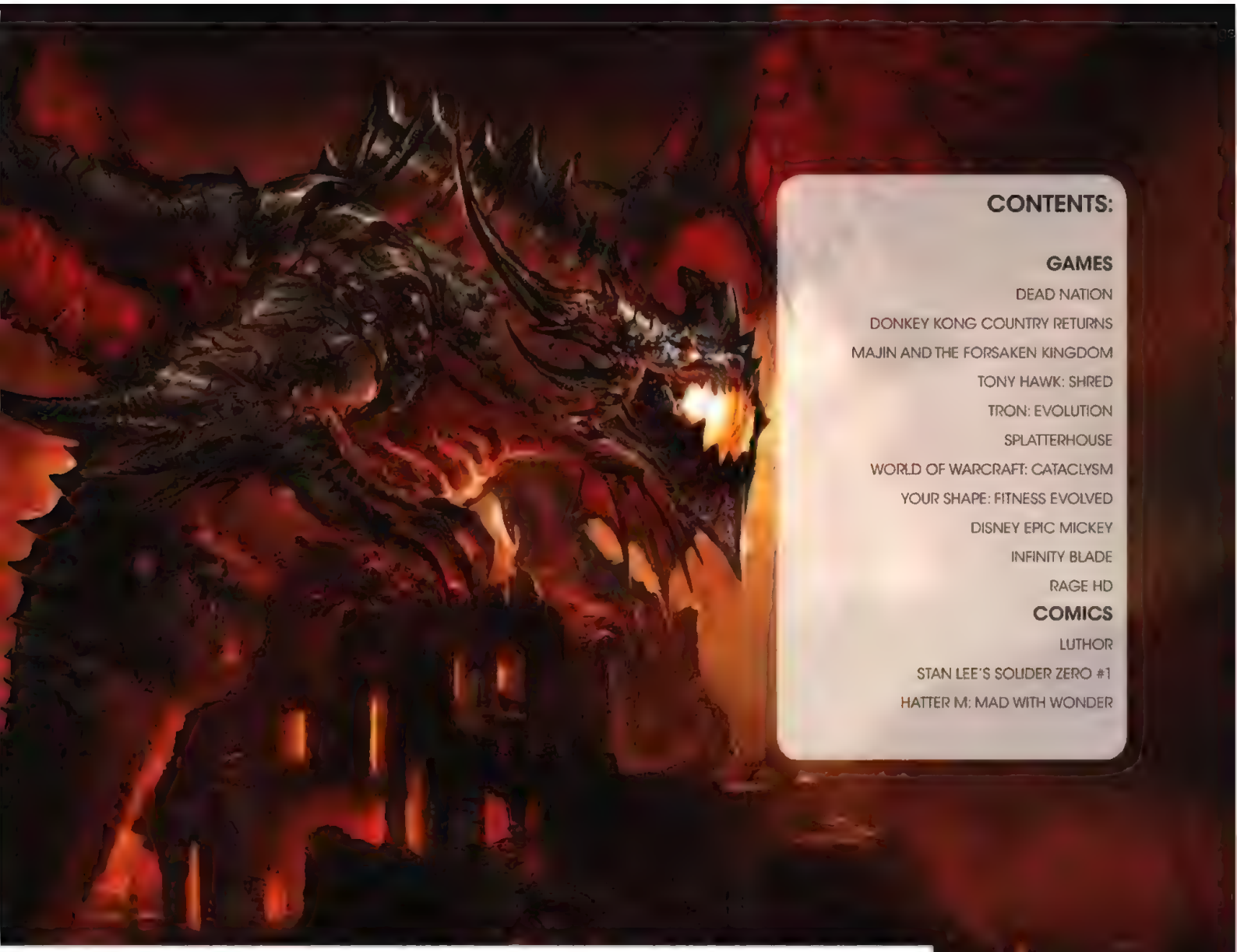
In the case of *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Red Dead Redemption* the addition of traditional games of chance is much more conventional, but no less effective. When presented with the option of hunting for pelts (radiated or otherwise) and rolling the dice the choice becomes clear. Gambling presents players with more than just a chance at in-game currency, they offer an opportunity to skip the more boring parts of a game.

Where this becomes problematic is when that risk/reward cycle overpowers the cycle provided by the core gameplay. *Call of Duty* handles this extremely well by making the experiences one and the same, but *Red Dead* and *New Vegas* narrowly avoid this by being spectacular games. Had their experiences been less enjoyable it's entirely possible I could have become so distracted I never finished either because it's happened to me before.

One of my dirtiest gaming secrets is that I've never finished *Final Fantasy VII*, I got distracted at the Golden Saucer long enough to forget what I was supposed to actually be doing. The same thing happened again with the amazing Triple Triad card game in *Final Fantasy VIII*.

Because I've traditional been more interested in strategy and action games than RPGs the availability of these alternatives, combined with the attractive pull of gambling ruined these games for me. It's a fine line to walk, and it takes a very skilled developer to balance an engaging gambling experience without it overshadowing the satisfaction the core game brings.

Despite the challenge, developers should continue this practice. Adding gambling conventions is an effective way of engaging players, and when handled correctly it can accent the game in a very positive way. Developers just need to be sure that their core experience is enjoyable enough to satisfy on its own, or else we'll be buying $69.99 casino games.



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# REVIEWS

## REVIEW GUIDE:

**Below 50**

Games that fail to meet even the most basic requirements of entertainment and competence with serious mechanical and/or design flaws Avoid at all costs

**50-59**

Games that meet the minimum requirements of functionality, but just barely Mechanical, technical and design problems are still present, though not to the point of complete unplayability. Only desperate fans would see value in these titles.

**60 - 69**

Games that manage to get it mostly right functionally, without ever really moving beyond that Flaws present can still have an impact on the experience Fans of the genre and more tolerant gamers can enjoy these titles

**70 - 79**

Games that manage to keep mechanical, technical and design flaws to a minimum while providing a solid experience Generally enough to satisfy but not impress fans or gamers outside the genre

**80 - 89**

Games that manage to provide a good, entertaining experience with only small flaws that are overlooked by the polish or innovation of the title. Both fans and newcomers to the genre will likely find something to appreciate here.

**90 - 100**

Games with little to no flaws that provide an exceptional entertainment experience New high watermarks of quality or design are established with such titles, and these games are must-haves for fans of the genre as well as good places for newcomers to start

# DEAD NATION

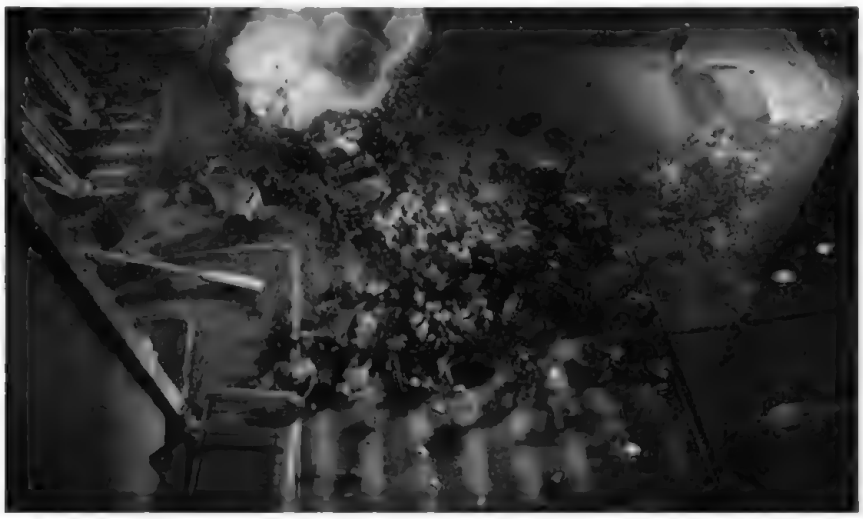
**SYSTEM:** PS3
**PUBLISHER:** SONY
**DEVELOPER:** HOUSEMARQUE
**GENRE:** SHOOTER
**ESRB RATING:** M
**REVIEW BY:** BRENDAN FRYE
**75**

Zombies have entered the mainstream media in a large way in recent years. With shows such as *The Walking Dead* and books like *World War Z*, it is no wonder we are now seeing a large selection of games taking on the concept of zombies. The newest title to take on the mantle is *Dead Nation* from the folks at Housemarque, the studio known for *Super Stardust HD*. If anyone is capable of taking zombies and injecting them into the Duel-Joystick Shooter style gameplay it is these guys. They do a great job save for a few choices that leave the title begging for an update.

The gameplay takes the hero (or heroes if playing in multiplayer) through ten levels filled with every manner of zombie you can think of. The decently low price of $15 buys you hours of gameplay, a minor story, and co-op that allows you to go though the game alone or with a friend. As you progress you are rewarded with money that can be spent on upgrades and weapons such as Shotgun, Flame Thrower etc.

The graphics do the job and give the concept of the desolation in the world you slog though, but with the camera pulled out from the action you may feel you are missing many of the details, along with zombies that feel repetitive after a while it seems like the game could have done with more work in the realm of graphics. The darkness of the game can also be an issue at times. With constant waves of enemies rushing towards you, the lack of visual awareness of the surroundings can be a real problem. With most shooters being bright and vibrant (especially *Super Stardust HD*), the darkness of the world adds to the challenge and often adds a layer of frustration to the experience that is unnecessary.

Still, the controls are easy to understand, so the interface never feels overly complex. Once you get the hang of how the game plays, it is simply a matter of trying an area until you find the way to overcome the obstacles. Sometimes the solution to how to survive is much simpler then it may first appear, and it can be very rewarding to overcome a section by the skin of your teeth.



The guns in the game do feel a little underpowered for the task at hand. Also, the lack of a laser scope upgrade (only the starting rifle has a laser sight) means that many of the guns feel imprecise. The lack of an unlimited ammo upgrade also made the rifle seem the default choice for any given scenario. This is disappointing since many of the later guns pack much more punch, but run out far to quickly to deal with the sheer number of enemies you will face.

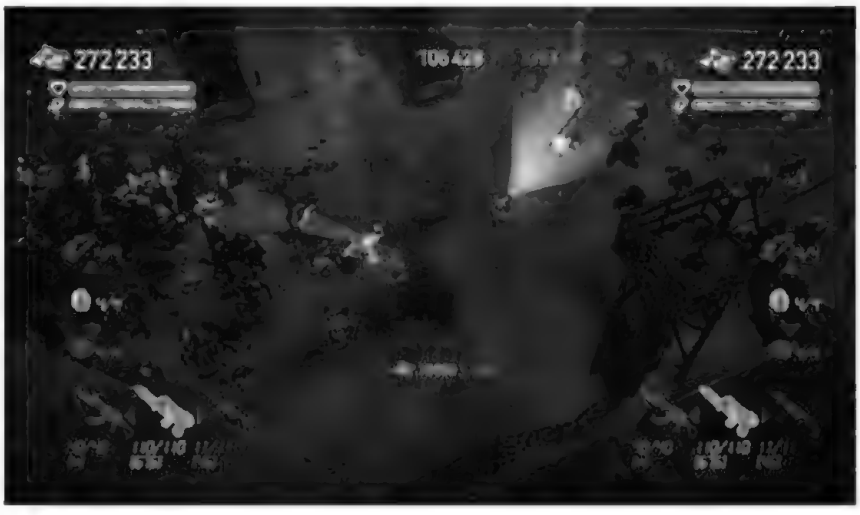
Story is lackluster at best - some small still-images and voice-over help set the tone for the game - but there is no dialogue or banter between co-op partners, and the feeling of urgency for the motivations of the characters is non-existent. Games like *Left 4 Dead* helped deal with the zombie apocalypse yet also gave an idea of why things are happening, and banter with the

characters allowed them to feel like people. In this game you are only a human gun, and your only real reason to play is to kill zombies.

Speaking of *Left 4 Dead*, if you played either of them many of the things seen in this game may feel familiar. The zombies have a very *Left 4 Dead*-feel and some seem almost taken right out of the Valve games. The boomer, Spitter and tank all make cameos in this title (or at very least their mirror likenesses do). This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does take away from some of the concepts seen in this title. It has a feeling of been-there-done-that, yet this is by not fully the creators' fault. The *Left 4 Dead* series has shaped how many people view zombie in games and with this fact we may be looking for the similarities.

The online play version is where the game really shines with a friend tagging along for the ride. Many of the struggles of the game seem far less difficult. One friend can fend off the initial swarm as the other gets their back to a wall and takes out another swarm. Due to some level design issues and the sheer number of enemies at one time, it can be very difficult to defend yourself when playing solo. There are very few places to put your back to a wall and deal with the oncoming threat. The online version at the time of publication does not feature voice-chat, although it is promised in a future update of the game. The present omission is glaring in a title released in 2010.

*Dead Nation* manages to retain much of the charm Housemarque have been known for but with the obvious issues listed here such as story, graphics, and lack of voice chat make it a less then perfect game. For the price, it will keep you killing zombies for hours, and if you are a PlayStation Plus member you can get the game for $13; there is more then enough to recommend for that price. With updates this game could be a "must-play", but in its present state, it is merely a solid purchase for the zombie lover.



# DONKEY KONG COUNTRY RETURNS

**SYSTEM:** WII
**PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO
**DEVELOPER:** FREESTYLEGAMES
**GENRE:** PLATFORMER
**ESRB RATING:** E
**REVIEW BY:** ERIKA SZABO
**78**

*Donkey Kong Country* is a title whose historical impact in the industry can't be denied. Besides helping popularize the idea of pre-rendered 3D visuals in 2D games, the game also inspired the development of today's "2.5D" games. Now, after years of odd cross-genre attempts with the Kong characters (with mixed results), it makes sense that Nintendo would want to rekindle *Donkey Kong* nostalgia in a pure side-scrolling action game. But with original *DKC* developers Rare now busy at Microsoft, can *Metroid Prime* producers Retro Studios make Kong a king again? While *Donkey Kong Country Returns* is a strong affirmation, the game still has some irritating issues.

First off, the general formula of a solid side-scroller is intact, complete with themed worlds, demanding jumps and pattern-based, increasingly challenging boss battles. As usual there are also a multitude of hidden bonuses in each level ranging from bananas, coins, and KONG letters to valuable puzzle pieces. Each can be found with a keen eye and a sense of exploration and experimentation. Unlike the original *DKC* games, bonus stages and items are rarely placed in arbitrary, out-of-the-way locales like random pits, careful players will see clues to help them find the hidden stuff. And if you're ever really stuck on your treasure hunt, old man Cranky Kong will sell you the services of puzzle piece-finding Squawks the Parrot. The goodie-grab aspect is a lot of fun, and will keep perfectionists occupied for quite some time.

*DKC Returns* does an excellent job of keeping things interesting, even though you're technically just moving to the right. It also plays with your expectations every few levels, switching things up so you never quite have a chance to get bored with the presentation.

Sadly, the platforming pleasure is often held back by *DKC Returns'* biggest fumble: controls. You can play the game using the Wii Remote held sideways or a combination of the Wii Remote and Nunchuck attachments – no Gamecube or Classic Controller support here. The game assigns multiple actions to a "waggle" movement of either the main controller or the Nunchuck – pounding the ground, rolling, and blowing air are all accomplished by shaking the controller. It sounds novel in theory, but it's downright infuriating in practice. Since several functions are assigned to the same motion, you will inevitably encounter situations where you meant to do one thing and do something else entirely – like rolling off a cliff to your death when you meant to ground-pound.

With these controls in mind, there rises another, equally strong sense of difficulty in gameplay. However, it's not in a fun, challenging, "one more time" kind of way, but in a frustrating, unclear and often misleading way that is unlike any prior *Donkey Kong* adventure. This isn't your typical retro game challenge, but rather a death-laden trial and error sections that break up the typical momentum familiar in past *DKC* titles.

There's no one stage that really surpasses the next in difficulty since the main issue at hand isn't difficulty per se, but rather a lack of communication. There are several points

in the game that never clearly illustrate what you can and can't jump on, or which crumbling pillars you should bother standing on and so forth. It's as though Retro Studios was expecting players to know just what to do and when to do it, whether it be a specific jump in the mine cart stage or a specific battle tactic. *DKC Returns'* cryptic and particular nature is frustrating to say the least and borderline unfair.

Cooperative mode – one player takes control of Donkey Kong and the other of Diddy – doesn't really make this any easier either. Diddy has slightly different moves, including a jetpack and peanut popgun. He can play normally or ride around on Donkey's back to offer the same extra powers as his single-player counterpart. Despite having the mode, *DKC Returns* isn't the least bit cooperative and the 2-player option works more as a free-for-all for both players. In fact, the game is actually *harder* with two players (which is saying a lot; the game is hard enough in single-player mode). Forcing two characters to navigate the tricky obstacles can make things a lot more chaotic, to say the least.

*Donkey Kong Country Returns* is undeniable proof that Retro's prowess isn't limited to sci-fi first-person shooters. It may not be the most groundbreaking title on the market, and it is laden with various problems in its controls, difficulty and co-op, but *DKC Returns* is still a solid title dripping with care and detail. It's bright and colourful, but not in a garish way, and some of the more surprising things in the art style lead to some of the most memorable levels I've ever seen. *DKC Returns* is a step in the right direction in terms of graphics and set up, but it's riddled with far too many unnecessary problems. Memories of games never die; just don't expect those nostalgic needs to be met.

# MAJIN AND THE FORSAKEN KINGDOM

**SYSTEM:** PS3 • 360
**PUBLISHER:** NAMCO BANDAI
**DEVELOPER:** GAME REPUBLIC
**GENRE:** ADVENTURE
**ESRB RATING:** T
**REVIEW BY:** WAYNE SANTOS
**79**



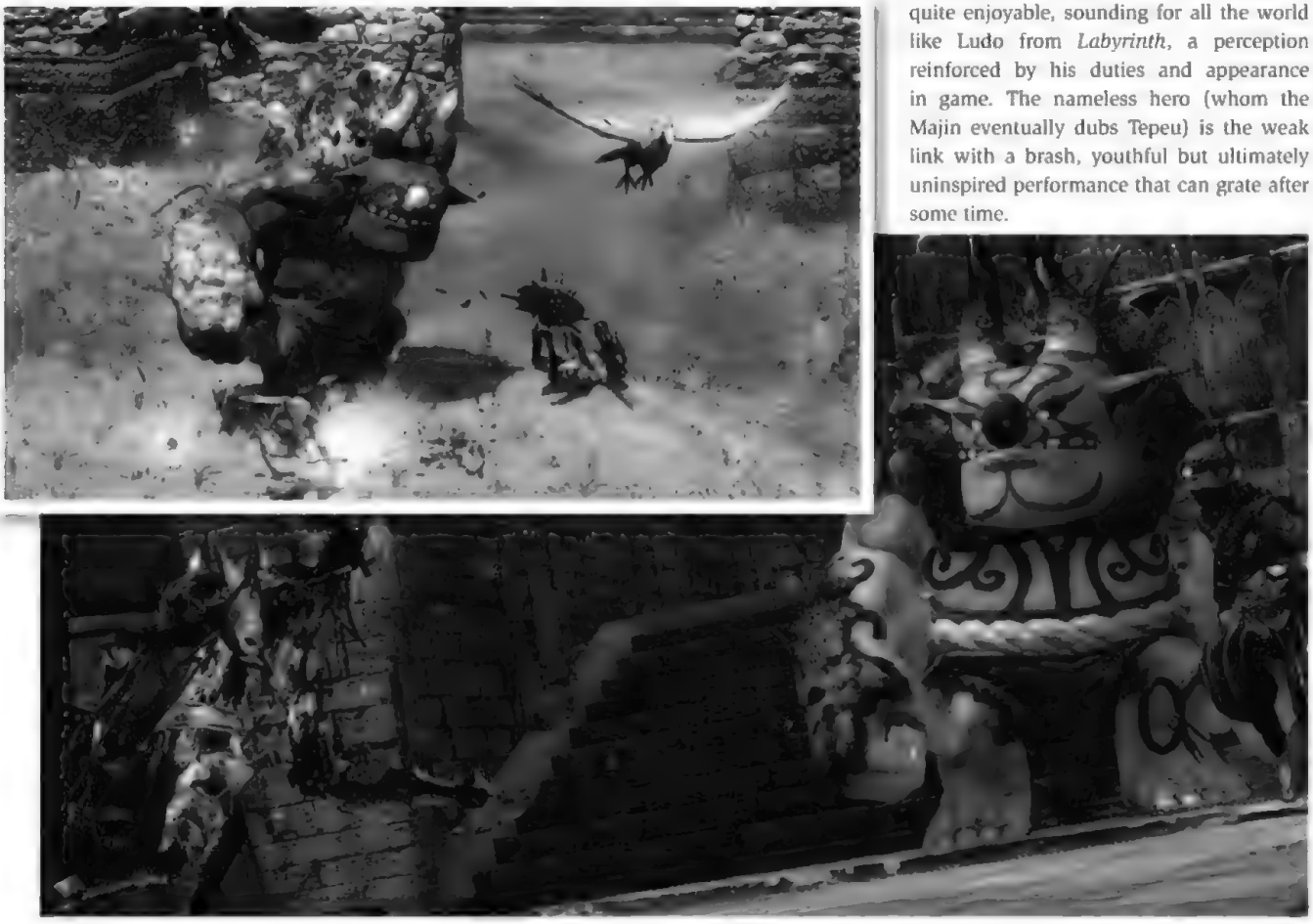
**Old School Charm**

In a climate where dark, gritty games with Big Important Themes crammed into high octane action gameplay is the fashion, it's nice to get a game developed by a team that still believes in telling sincere, heartfelt, charming stories for the young and young at heart. *Majin and the Forsaken Kingdom* is one of those games. It may not be the best game on the market right now, but it's got heart, which counts for something.

**Saving The Kingdom**

This is basically a fairy tale. In a far away kingdom, a scourge of inky darkness has been spreading from the king's castle. A thief with the ability to converse with animals breaks into the palace and finds an imprisoned, legendary beast known as the Majin. He frees the Majin and the adventure is on to restore the Majin's stripped away abilities and eventually save the kingdom. This isn't exactly original story-telling, but it has the same sincerity and even environmental undertones of a Miyazaki feature, even if it's nowhere near as elegantly executed.

This is a budget title, priced at a reasonable $40, and, unfortunately its budget production values show in the visuals. After a string of good looking games in 2010, *Majin and the Forsaken Kingdom* resembles a launch console title in terms of visual fidelity. The polygon counts are obviously lower than something like the characters in *Killzone 2* or *Uncharted*, and the textures don't have the crispness or detail of higher profile, multi-platform titles like *Resident Evil*. This is mitigated somewhat by the careful art direction, and the emotive use of lighting as the environments move through their day and night cycles, but a careful examination by a discerning gamer quickly outs the game as unexceptional or even slightly sub-par by today's HD standards. Sound fares better, with a fitting and gorgeously composed orchestral soundtrack that manages to hit all the right beats with the action on screen. It's lyrical stuff that's in keeping with the fairy tale ambiance of the game. The voice acting is not quite as strong. The Majin himself is actually quite enjoyable, sounding for all the world like Ludo from *Labyrinth*, a perception reinforced by his duties and appearance in game. The nameless hero (whom the Majin eventually dubs Tepeu) is the weak link with a brash, youthful but ultimately uninspired performance that can grate after some time.



**Action & Adventure, But Mostly Adventure**

*Majin and the Forsaken Kingdom* is, in many ways, a rough but delightful throwback. It's not often that you see a game unafraid to appeal to all ages that still manages to mix in some hardcore puzzle solving elements with some simple platforming and combat. It's not going to rise up to the same level of revered quality, but there are echoes of *Legend of Zelda*, *Metroid* and even a little bit of *Ico* thrown into this interesting mix of a game. The game is constructed much like one massive Zelda dungeon, with the player moving from "room" to "room" each one constructed with a puzzle that will require some stealth, some combat, some environmental puzzle solving, the use of the Majin's abilities, or a little bit of all of them. The Majin himself is the central mechanic of the game, starting out as little more than a strong brute good for brawling and eventually unlocking elemental abilities like blowing wind or projecting lightning to aid in puzzle solving and combat. Combat is primarily on the shoulders of the Majin as well, being the stronger of the two, with thief assisting when he can, and setting up devastating combo attacks with the Majin for powerful finishing moves.

The Majin could have been a horrible AI companion, but is smartly handled with a series of simple orders that get him to do what you want, or have him wait patiently somewhere when you need him out of the way. Sneaking is obviously much easier for the thief, and it creates an interesting relationship between the two, with the players reconnoitring the area and even taking out enemies (albeit temporarily, only the Majin can permanently kill foes) with stealth, and then helping the Majin to get where he needs to go in order to solve the puzzles. It's an older style of gaming that's not so commonly seen anymore and for the most part, Game Republic has succeeded. Where *Majin and the Forsaken Kingdom* stumbles is in the individual parts. Platforming plays an important role in the game, but the controls for platforming themselves can be a little clunky, occasionally leading to unnecessary falls that can result in discovery and combat if you were trying to sneak over your enemy's head. Combat is simplistic, though again, sometimes the looseness of the controls can get in way of consistently doing what you want when you want, and the camera can occasionally be difficult to negotiate during these hectic fights as it gets confused when the thief is in a corner or some other area in proximity to walls. And of course, this is a single-player game with no online component, so re-playability is a factor for the more budget conscious.

But for all the rough spots that are found mechanically, the game shines conceptually. The puzzles can provide a challenge for some, especially those not used to thinking their way through games, but the solutions are always logical and never too frustrating. The use of the Majin, building up his power, using him to as both a tool and a fighting companion is generally well conceived and his character is presented sweetly enough that it will be easy for kids and the young at heart to get a little attached to him. There's also a whole host of collectible items, from optional "fruits" (the source of the Majin's power) to boost his stats to stat boosting costume pieces and other items hidden in treasure chests. It lengthens time so that this 10-12 hour game could actually go on for considerably longer for completionists.

*Majin and the Forsaken Kingdom* is a far from perfect game, with some obvious mechanical deficiencies, but those rough spots are blemishes on what is an otherwise charming game. In a crowded holiday season, the game has little chance of making much of an impact, but for gamers looking for something different, something rough around the edges, and something with a little bit of heart, this is definitely worth looking into.

# TONY HAWK: SHRED

**SYSTEM:** PS3 • 360 • WII
**PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION
**DEVELOPER:** ROBOMODO
**GENRE:** SPORTS
**ESRB RATING:** E
**REVIEW BY:** ERIC WEISS
**25**

There's a sequence in *Tony Hawk: Shred* in which you jump over the outstretched jaws of a giant shark, and never has level design been more indicative of the terminal nature of a release. The latest installment in the crumbling *Tony Hawk* franchise sounds bad when you hear about it, looks bad when you see it, and is bad when you play it, and is yet more proof that you shouldn't necessarily release a new game just because you can.

If you're unfamiliar with the title, *Tony Hawk: Shred* is an otherwise conventional skateboarding game that replaces the standard video game controller with a skateboard peripheral that sits on the floor beneath your feet. The board has a sensor on each side and generally aspires to be the extreme sports equivalent of *Guitar Hero*.

Amazingly, poor peripherals aren't as much of an issue as you'd expect. The skateboard controller works surprisingly well, in the sense that it's a responsive and durable piece of equipment that demands precision and can accurately record your actions. The problem is that forcing players to use a real skateboard doesn't make virtual skateboarding any more enjoyable, and the software design doesn't do the player any favors.

If you've ever stepped onto a skateboard, you'll know that it's an incredibly hard sport to pick up and you're far more likely to face plant into the concrete than you are to grind your way down a rail. *Tony Hawk: Shred* doesn't place you at risk for traumatic injury, but it does expose you to all of the embarrassment of actual skateboarding. If you don't know what you're doing, you're going to spend most of your time stumbling around your living room waiting for something interesting to happen.

*Tony Hawk: Shred* is consequently a game with a gimmick but no actual identity. The design is explicitly geared towards children (you'll receive a sickening amount of positive reinforcement from the cast of skate celebrities) and many of the mechanics

have been tweaked to make things more accessible. For instance, you can grind a rail as long as you're able to get close to it and the game does it's best to keep you upright as long as you're not crashing into walls.

Yet even with such forgiving modifications, the controls are still tuned for a serious simulation instead of the absurd. Unless you've got excellent balance and are somewhat familiar with the physics of a skateboard, basic kick flips, ollies, and grinds are the only techniques that you'll reliably be able to pull off and the promised big air and bigger tricks never fully materialize.

The overall structure, meanwhile, is unremarkably conventional. As with any other *Tony Hawk* game, your goal is to do tricks to score points to unlock more stages, characters, and gear. The disc doesn't skimp on content and there's enough here to keep you occupied for hours.

The gameplay just isn't compelling enough to warrant that kind of attention. For one thing, there's hardly any diversity. You can go downhill while trying to score the most points or go downhill while trying to collect the most tokens, and that's pretty much it. There are a handful of snowboarding levels and a challenge mode that forces you to execute specific tricks at specific points on the track, but it's all variation on a tired theme that pads game length without offering any tangible reward.

The on-rails gameplay is similarly frustrating, since you're always moving downhill at the same speed regardless of anything you happen to be doing you're your feet. Jumping to avoid obstacles will score you some extra points but you could leave your house and your character would still make it to the end of the run.

The more difficult gameplay settings do provide you with a bit more agency, but the introduction of steering only makes the game worse. You're still moving downhill at a constant speed and the navigation controls are so sensitive that the slightest tilt in any direction will send you careening into a wall without the benefit of a brake pedal.

You're better off if you try to do exactly what the game says, but even then it doesn't feel as if you have any input into any final outcome. I could never replicate a successful run and the game moves at such a fast pace that it's tough to process the levels while you're playing. The multiple paths always take you to the same place and there's seldom any incentive to get creative.

*Tony Hawk: Shred* ultimately lacks the exploration and experimentation that made the original installments in the series so much fun. You can't collect S-K-A-T-E, there's no hidden tape, and you can't head to the top of the ramp to set up that one perfect trick. All you can do is hit a few jumps and grind a few rails on your way to the finish, and the luster quickly wears off what is an unbelievably repetitive game.

That's also why *Tony Hawk: Shred* inspires apathy more than hate. I was so bored after the first hour of play that I'd start looking at the clock while trying to determine how much longer I needed to play in order to fulfill my professional responsibilities, and anything that can make video games feel like work is not something that you'd want to pay for.

In the interest of full disclosure, I'll admit that I did not unlock everything, but unless there's a hidden mode that miraculously makes the game fun, I'm reasonably confident that the present review will suffice. *Tony Hawk: Shred* is a terrible game, and picking up a real skateboard and some kneepads would be a far better use of your funds.

# TRON: EVOLUTION

**SYSTEM:** 360 • PS3 • WII
**PUBLISHER:** DISNEY INTERACTIVE
**DEVELOPER:** PROPAGANDA GAMES
**GENRE:** ACTION
**ESRB RATING:** T
**REVIEW BY:** WAYNE SANTOS
**78**

**Greetings, Program**

Talk about the 80s and one of the inevitable facets of pop culture that surfaces is the integration of computers into our personal lives. *Tron*, a 1982 movie that was one of the first to use extensive CG effects, spear-headed that mindset for the children of the era, postulating a world where programs were people that literally fought for their lives in the games we played in arcades. Now, with the newly released sequel in theaters, a game is available that bridges events between the original film and *Tron: Legacy*, and mostly it works.

**You're A Guest Of The Master Control Program**

*Tron: Evolution* is that rare movie property that doesn't base itself directly on the events of the film. Instead, it reveals events after the original *Tron* that create the situation Sam Flynn, hero of *Tron: Legacy* has to sort out. Here, Kevin Flynn is a benevolent god of sorts, known as The Creator of the system, which is a closed network he lords over. His joy over the discovery of Isomorphic Algorithms, artificial intelligences that have spontaneously appeared in his system, creates a schism between himself and Clu 2, the AI he created specifically to oversee his network. A coup d'etat occurs and it is up to you, a Systems Monitor program known as Anon, to rescue The Creator and restore order to the system.

Visually speaking, there's little to complain about in *Evolution*. After all, the conceit of the story is that it all takes place in a computer world, and is thus not subject to expectations of photorealism. Instead, the final arbiter is the art direction, with the neon lines of the source material ever present, only now in high definition. The game is true to the visuals of the new film, and, thanks to the simplicity of the cinematic visuals, actually manages to account itself well. The only downside is in the presentation of its stars, with Jeff Bridges, Bruce Boxleitner and Olivia Wilde all turning in appearances that fall squarely into the uncanny valley. The environments however, show imagination and beauty, and there are no technical problems to speak of with a rock steady frame rate, and no issues with pop up, draw-in, or low level textures snapping into higher levels of detail a second too late. The sound on the other hand, is generally perfect, with iconic effects such as Recognizers and light cycles accurately represented, as well as the digital staccato of footsteps as Programs walk and run around the environment. Daft Punk, the DJ duo that also participated in film soundtrack, has lent their music to the game as well. While the overall sound quality is not full of realistic explosions, it's consistent with the digital world the game presents.

**It's All In The Wrists**

The quick n' dirty shorthand for *Tron: Evolution* is it's essentially *Prince of Persia* with some vehicle segments, clocking in at about 6-8 hours for the single-player campaign. Like *Prince of Persia*, Anon traverses environments that incorporate wall running, cliff jumping, and searching for handholds to advance through the levels, regularly broken up by arena-style combat that uses the signature "deadly discs" and the occasional light cycle or tank sequence for some vehicular mayhem.

The controls are generally responsive, if a little twitchy at times, the largest offender being the light cycle, where oversteering is a regular occurrence thanks to the sensitivity of the controls. There's also a novel—though largely gimmicky—option to use the Playstation Move controller held horizontally like a "light cycle control bar" a la the original movies. Combat is a simple, but unique affair, limiting the use of special moves thanks to a meter that drains with each use, and forces players to play a mobile game of combat, attacking and then retreating to regain health or special attack energy by running across strategically placed power strips in every combat arena. The only irritant in combat is the auto-targeting of enemies that tends to get confused in hectic fights. Like Konami's *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow*, this is not about standing in place and spamming a move over and over again, it forces players to be quick or be dead. The vehicle segments are brief with players finally being able to play their own game of "Space Paranoids" from Flynn's arcade as they finally take the controls of a tank and shoot Recognizers out of the sky.

There's also a levelling system in place that, surprisingly carries over between single player and multi-player games. Whatever XP and perks you buy for yourself in the campaign are useable in the multi-player, where the full host of Anon's abilities finally get a workout. In multi-player, that XP gained in both modes goes towards boosting various stats such as health, the special attack meter, level of damage from special attacks and even perks like health regeneration that must be "equipped" before going into a multi-player round. Multi-player itself consists of the usual suspects such as death match (dubbed Disintegration) and team variants, along with capture the flag games (called Bit Runner) that involve taking possession of the infamous Bit while tearing about the play area in light cycles and, yes, getting people to run into the light wall trailing behind you, or, if certain nodes are captured, shooting at people in tanks.

*Tron: Evolution* is best described as a safe game. There is nothing fundamentally flawed with it, it runs smoothly, with no technical problems, it has a variety of activities, from platforming to combat to vehicle activity, and it even tells an interesting story that sets things up nicely for the movie. If anything could be criticized it's simply the lack of ambition. Levels never introduce anything new or noteworthy to platformers, and the combat works well, although targeting needs work, and the multi-player has enough longevity to keep those tired of first person shooters interested. But there's nothing here with the same level of polish as the hardly original *God of War* or the sheer level design genius of the first *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*. On the other hand, as a game based on a flim property it's actually one of the better titles available, not dragging its namesake into the mud as the recent *Iron Man* or *Superman* games have done. As a straight on game, it's good, but as a movie-based game, it's great. There may be better, higher profile titles out there, but this is actually a solid title.

# SPLATTERHOUSE

**SYSTEM:** 360 • PS3
**PUBLISHER:** NAMCO
**DEVELOPER:** NAMCO
**GENRE:** BRAWLER
**ESRB RATING:** M
**REVIEW BY:** JUSTIN AMIRKHANI

**60**

Splatterhouse is not a good game. It's glitchy, poorly written, derivative, repetitive, and offers nothing in the form of stimulation other than cheap thrills. It's the very definition of a terrible video game and anyone with half a modicum of self-respect would avoid it completely. However, pop it in your system and there's no doubt you'll be smiling within minutes.

We've all watched a movie that's so bad it's good; *Plan 9 From Outer Space* or *Troll 2* quickly come to mind. Splatterhouse introduces us to the B-game, full of so much juvenilia that it's impossible not to enjoy despite its horrendous quality.

In Splatterhouse players take control of Rick, a muscle-bound freak with arms the size of blue fin tuna and a demonic mask that gives him the ability to regenerate. As you punch and smash your way through stage after stage of fist-fodder minions you'll earn blood points which can be spent on upgrades that make it easier to punch and smash.

Of course, Rick wasn't always like this; as the story goes he was a normal gawky sort of guy who was in love with his girlfriend Jenny. It wasn't until after Dr.West kidnapped his girl and left him dying in a pool of blood that he found the mask that gave him the power to save his life and rescue her.

Apart from that premise, which sounds like it was ripped out of an early 90's Todd McFarlane comic, there isn't much meat to the narrative. Through some banter between Rick and the mask we gather some scant details about Aztecs or another dimension, but it never really pieces together anything meaningful. There is a bit of legitimate melancholy at the end, but Splatterhouse is a long way away from being a legitimate tragedy.

Most that play this game likely aren't coming for the story anyway though. As the game touts, it's full of blood and guts and carnage. Rick's meaty hands pop heads and tear spines with ease, spewing more blood than The Crazy 88 in *Kill Bill*. Every enemy is a grotesque deformation of semi-humanoid flesh and the environments are plastered with gore. Splatterhouse is definitely a game that enjoys the privileges that come with being an M-rated game.

In addition to gratuitous violence those M-rated privileges include some softcore pornography. In his pursuit to rescue Jennifer, Rick will come across torn photographs of her in various states of dress ranging from skanky Halloween costume to a fully-nude shower scene. It's cheeky and sensational at best, but lacks any sense of class.

The gratuitous nature will offend many, the violence is as extravagant as it gets and the sexual objectification of your damsel is as chauvinistic as it comes. Still, there's something charming in its unapologetically uncouth nature. Like letting a stranger buy you ice cream, you'll enjoy it even if you wouldn't want to tell your parents.

Splatterhouse' charm is not infinite though, the game suffers from some crippling bugs that just can't be overlooked. Multiple times during the review period poor clipping detection would cause monsters to get stuck in walls, or Rick would fall through some geometry bringing the game to a disappointing halt.

These sorts of issues should not exist, especially in the incredibly linear environments the game presents. One time during one of the game's few platforming sequences it autosaved just as Rick was falling off a ledge causing the game to reload his untimely demise over and over again. Players should not have to endure this sort of frustration when trying to enjoy their game.

In addition to the obvious technical issues, Splatterhouse has a hard time keeping the combat enthralling. Almost every confrontation is handled by rabid button-mashing with a few breaks to pick up weapons or grapple an opponent for a finisher move. There is a little strategy included with the ability to regenerate health

once enough blood has been collected, but it doesn't add enough to require an active brain while playing.

To make matters worse Rick's ability to turn in to an unstoppable superbeast is easily abused with the right upgrades. This means that most of the more difficult enemies can be quickly eliminated leaving only the fodder to take care of afterwards. This reduces the game's challenge significantly and makes the battles feel even more hollow.

For those few who come to the game because of the original Splatterhouse games, all three classic titles are available as unlockables within the campaign mode. Offering the classic Japanese arcade version these are authentic to the 16-bit gore you (might) remember from your childhood. It's a small inclusion, but it's appreciated in an age where this could have easily been a stand-alone XBLA release.

Splatterhouse doesn't offer any multiplayer options, but it does have a 'Survival Room' mode that challenges players to defeat 20 waves of enemies as quickly as possible. This would do something to extend the gameplay if the combat were well designed, but without quality fight mechanics it's just another way to earn a nudie photo. Unfortunately, once the 6-8 hour campaign is done there's very little reason to keep it around.

Splatterhouse is a game that's plagued with a long list of problems, but an identity crisis is not among that list. It's one of those games that feel self-aware in its awkwardness, letting players enjoy it for the horrorshow it is. Splatterhouse is not going to be on the top of anyone's must-have lists, nor will it ever win a game of the year award but it's impossible to deny that it has charm.

Through its shameless display of blood, sex, and violence Splatterhouse will carve a place out in the hearts of gaming's most depraved enthusiasts. It's sick and you have to be sick to enjoy it, but that's just part of the fun. For those who can stomach technical flaws and really want a meaningless game full of tits and gore, Splatterhouse will be your haven. This is a game designed for the perverts and monsters we all pretend we aren't.

# WORLD OF WARCRAFT: CATACLYSM

**SYSTEM:** PC • MAC
**PUBLISHER:** BLIZZARD
**DEVELOPER:** BLIZZARD
**GENRE:** MMO
**ESRB RATING:** T
**REVIEW BY:** JUSTIN AMIRKHANI

**95**

With over 12 million players *World of Warcraft* players worldwide, Azeroth has a population approaching half the size of Canada. Considering the immense amount of time most of these players invest in the game it's impossible to dispute that Azeroth is like a second home to many. Blizzard is now disrupting that home with *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm*, literally tearing it apart and rebuilding it from the ground up.

Players who've spent hundreds of hours getting to know Kalimdor and The Eastern Kingdoms are in for a shock as a large majority of the zones in each continent have been completely redone. This includes a hefty portion of the level 1-60 zones, and with the remodel comes a significant change to the questing structure.

Unlike the addition of Northrend in *Wrath of the Lich King* or Outland in *Burning Crusade* the recreation of the core continents provides new content to all players, regardless of whether they own *Cataclysm* or not. While this may seem like a foolish move for a company trying to sell an expansion pack, the all-encompassing nature of the update provides new players with a reason to care about it.

When *World of Warcraft* first launched 6 years ago MMO games were in their infancy and that's easy to see from looking at the core game experience. Though the genre has evolved *Warcraft's* core content has not, and because it is the first thing players must complete before getting to the more modern content of *Burning Crusade* or *Lich King* it turned a lot of players away. There are only so many wolf pelts to collect and infested mines to clear out before new players get bored.

Blizzard has recognized and addressed this problem in the best way possible. A

complete redesign of the world has provided them with an opportunity to bring some of those modern sensibilities to the earlier content. Players now have access to far more cinematic and engaging quests earlier in the game, making the entire experience of leveling 1-60 (a 125 hour process for most) far more enjoyable.

By adding quests that allow players to control characters other than their own the game introduces game mechanics in a far more dynamic way and combats the bore of feeling powerless in a fantasy world. There are also more opportunities for players to have a visual effect on the world with quests that let them do more impressive tasks like blowing up buildings or chopping down forests.

Blizzard staff has also realized that despite the RPG nature of the world's biggest MMORPG there can still be quests that require a little manual dexterity. Maneuvering through minefields or firing cannons at oncoming marauders are just a two examples among many of how the game feels a lot more action-oriented.

All of these additions make rolling a new character a completely worthwhile experience and complete the game's promise of an exciting fantasy adventure from the get-go. Even if you're a veteran player it is worth starting fresh just to experience end-game quality content through the entirety of a character's progression.

For those who do plan to start anew, *Cataclysm* also offers some new races to try out. The long-requested fan-favourite Goblins have joined The Horde, bringing with them a playful sense of greed and intense love of gadgetry. Meanwhile the Alliance is seeing the first morphing race with The Worgen, a group of lycanthropic humans who can transform in to feral wolf-like creatures.

The Goblin starting zone, Kezan, is a steampunk inspired marvel. Roads twist and bend across each other creating a winding motorway of Goblin hot rods. There's a strong industrial vibe to the whole place with smokestacks pumping out fumes and factories on every corner. Though the comparison seems obvious, it would be unfair to call the Goblins a Horde knockoff of the Gnomes; Gnomes aren't nearly as cool.

Worgen start in the formerly walled gothic city of Gilneas, a dark and creepy place that feels like it was inspired by equal parts Charles Dickens and Tim Burton. A dark cloud perpetually hangs over the medieval architecture while the Worgen do battle with an appropriately evil force, the undead Forsaken.

For those that can't be bothered starting fresh, *Cataclysm* does offer a lot of new content for the end-game crowd. From the uncharted deserts of Uldum to the completely underwater zone of Vashj'ir there are some very unique new places to visit. Those with flying mounts will now also be able to revisit the original zones, as the redesign has given Blizzard an opportunity to make it possible.

While the expansion only adds 5 levels to the whole experience (bringing the total to 85) instead of the customary 10, Blizzard has branched out in new ways to make the high-level experience more satisfying. The inclusion of guild leveling and achievements offers a new path to greatness for those who love group play, and the new island Tol Barad enhances the PVP experience with an expansive map full of daily events and new rewards.

For those at the peak level Deathwing of the Dragon Aspects (the demonic force that caused the *Cataclysm*) offers an appropriately menacing enemy. Not only does he appear at various points in the 80-85 quests, but he also flies around Azeroth torching entire zones – innocent players and all – without remorse. Though only the most powerful players will be able to fight him directly Deathwing does a good job as a villain, everyone wants revenge.

Gear fiends will find more than enough new equipment to satisfy their lust for purple armour sets. With more new raids in Cataclysm than any expansion before it there's plenty of fresh content to make earning the gear more enjoyable.

Overall the *Cataclysm* experience offers a lot for both new players and old. Both can enjoy replaying the earliest content with a fresh spin, and both will enjoy the streamlined design the revision has brought. For the first time Blizzard has delivered an update to the game that satisfies both groups equally.

If *Cataclysm* has a drawback it's that the core mechanics of the game are largely still the same. If you're not an MMO fan already, this will be the game to get you in to it. However, if you can't abide managing inventories and some basic stats it's probably not worth your time.

That being said, *Cataclysm* has done wonders for *World of Warcraft* making it more accessible and enjoyable than ever before. There's a reason *Warcraft* has always been on top of the market, and updates like those brought in *Cataclysm* remind us of those reasons very well.

# YOUR SHAPE: FITNESS EVOLVED

**SYSTEM:** 360
**PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT
**DEVELOPER:** UBISOFT
**GENRE:** FITNESS
**ESRB RATING:** E
**REVIEW BY:** ERIC WEISS
**75**

The conventional rules of game criticism may not apply to Ubisoft's *Your Shape: Fitness Evolved* – it may be at its best when you're not having fun – but it's at least a product that works exactly as intended. *Your Shape* is a functional title that provides a decent workout and if you're only looking to shed a couple of pounds, it's definitely worth looking into.

The gameplay in *Your Shape* is built around Kinect's motion control technology. The screen depicts a virtual trainer doing a preset workout routine and your goal is to match the timing and motions of the instructor. The game tells you the percentage of the moves you execute correctly and in rhythm and it's accurate enough to be worthwhile. If you can keep up and follow the instructions, you'll burn calories and even tone a little bit of muscle.

That's ultimately all that matters. Kinect's potential as a hardcore gaming platform is yet to be tapped, but the hands-free hardware is perfect for this type of product and it pushes *Your Shape* well beyond *Wii Fit*. There are no cumbersome peripherals or controllers to contend with and having a full range of motion allows for a more authentic workout.

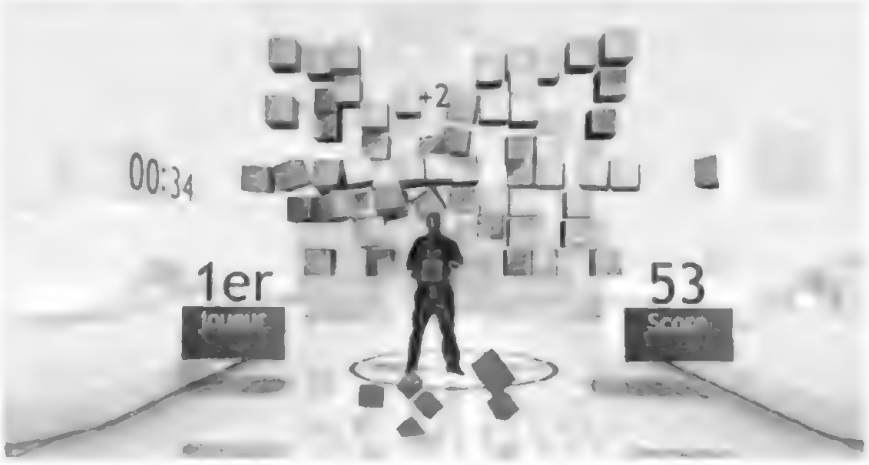
The result is a game that feels like a legitimate exercise tool instead of a cheap interactive gimmick. *Your Shape* has the official seal of approval from Men's Health and Women's Health – both magazines contributed a handful of routines to the game – and there's room for improvisation with weights depending on your skill level. Dumbbells may not come with the disc, but they're a sound investment if you're serious about getting into shape.

Fortunately, the game works well regardless of your chosen tools. There are a few minor consistency and recognition issues, but they're easy to overlook because the only score that matters is the calorie counter, and that will still go up even if your timing is off.

The exercises themselves are basic techniques that use body weight to generate resistance. Squats, lunges, jumping jacks, and punches are the main order of the day, and while these may not be the sexiest activities, they are effective and will get your heart rate going.

The primary focus is on Personal Training, which is the exercise equivalent of a career mode. *Your Shape* will ask you a few questions about your weight, lifestyle, and stated goals and then recommend some appropriate routines and track your progress. The game records the total number of calories burned, as well as the calories burned during every exercise routine and daily session, and watching the ticker climb ever higher does provide a certain healthy satisfaction.

You can choose to emphasize toning, cardio, or sculpting, and there are dozens of options spread across three difficulty settings. The average routine is only four-to-ten minutes long, but the menus are easy to navigate and you're encouraged to string multiple



routines together. There's more than enough variety to keep things interesting – you can try everything from the Sleeve-Busting Arm routine to After Baby Toning – making *Your Shape* at least worth it's weight in exercise DVDs.

Sadly, that might not be true for the more physically fit, since *Your Shape* is tailored for a casual workout audience that won't move without incentive. The Advanced workouts are the trickiest routines in the game, and they'd hardly be considered strenuous. If you're an athlete – or even if exercise is just a regular part of your daily regimen – there's probably not much for you here until Ubisoft rolls out some more intense DLC.

Turning to the other game modes, the Fitness Classes are as good as anything you'll find in Personal Training, but the only options are Cardio Boxing and Zen, so the content is fairly limited. Kinect also struggles to recognize many of the more outlandish Zen postures, so matching the various yoga poses requires as much guesswork as flexibility.

The Gym Games, meanwhile, are a complete waste of time. You can play Virtual Smash with up to four players, but the workout value is minimal and a more conventional disc like *Rock Band* is infinitely more useful at a party.

Some of the *Your Shape*'s other shortcomings can be blamed on the limitations of the Kinect technology. The depth sensor can be fooled when your legs are behind your body, and you may find yourself contorting otherwise fluid motions in order to make Kinect recognize your actions.

The workout mat can also feel a little cramped, as colorful flower petals will start to appear whenever any limb protrudes outside the designated play area. It's a helpful gameplay indicator, but it's virtually impossible to stay centered while doing lunges, kicks, and sidesteps, so you'll have to make constant adjustments in order to stay in frame.

*Your Shape* further features a somewhat absurd amount of locked content. The Personal Training Quiz will allow you to jump right to some of the tougher stuff, but you'll have to slog through every tier of Cardio Boxing and you'll be presented with a tutorial for every single new technique. It takes at least two sessions to work through all of the introductory material, making it tough to get into the flow of the program.

Finally, there's hardly any mention of stretching, which seems like a significant oversight for a game devoted to healthy living. It might not work as a gameplay mode – Kinect does have a minimum height requirement – but a few tips would have been both advisable and welcome.

Despite the flaws, I'm inclined to be more forgiving of the technical shortcomings than I would be for your average first person shooter. *Your Shape*'s primary goal is to convince people to get up and get moving, so the game can still be fully effective even if you're only approximating the actions and the design is admirable in that regard. *Your Shape* can't make you work out, but it's nonetheless a solid beginner's title that delivers on the advertisements. If it ends up collecting dust with the rest of your discarded exercise equipment, you have no one but yourself to blame.

# DISNEY EPIC MICKEY

**SYSTEM:** WII
**PUBLISHER:** DISNEY INTERACTIVE
**DEVELOPER:** JUNCTION POINT
**GENRE:** PLATFORMER
**ESRB RATING:** E
**REVIEW BY:** ERIC WEISS
**85**

At a glance, *Disney's Epic Mickey* is a standard platformer in which you play as a well-worn character and double jump your way across a variety of 3D landscapes, but that doesn't even begin to capture the complexity of Warren Spector's latest project. *Epic Mickey* is a truly unique game that simultaneously rejuvenates an iconic hero and breathes new life into a retired Disney history.

*Epic Mickey* begins when Mickey accidentally knocks over a bottle of enchanted paint thinner and unleashes the Shadow Blot on Wasteland, a magical realm populated with a variety of forgotten Disney characters. Once Mickey becomes trapped in that world, he has to make amends for his mistake and find his way back to the land of the relevant.

Along the way he'll join forces with a tiny guide gremlin named Gus and Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, the de facto ruler of Wasteland. Oswald happens to hold one hell of a grudge (you might want to Google it), and is not too happy to have Mickey shaking things up at home.

With such a premise, *Epic Mickey* is far darker than anything you'd expect from Disney. Wasteland – with areas like Mickey Junk Mountain and Mean Street – is a somber dystopia surrounded by oceans of deadly green sludge. The character design dates back to Mickey and Oswald animated shorts from the 1920s and 30s, and much of it will be wholly unfamiliar to younger (and even older) generations.

Fortunately, the game's subtle humor and warmth offset the bleak obscurity and make for a highly original adventure. Spector's Mickey isn't the sterile mascot that sells hats to tourists in Florida. Instead, he's a happy-go-lucky individual with a genuine personality that is at once innocent and mature without being overly cute or cynical.

The core gameplay, on the other hand, is generally unremarkable. The levels are functional, the jumping is serviceable,

and there's more than enough diversity to make the game's 12-15 hours worthwhile. Projection screens serve as portals to the various areas of wasteland and break up the 3D exploration with some creative 2D platforming sections set inside classic Disney cartoons.

*Epic Mickey* stands apart thanks to an incredibly intricate mission structure that emphasizes player choice. As you explore Wasteland, you'll encounter a series of NPCs in need of assistance and your actions will influence your relationship with the world around you. If you help the people of Wasteland, the other characters will reciprocate your kindness. Should you opt to be the mischievous prankster, you'll find a chillier reception and mistreated characters can be lost forever.

From a game design perspective, the results are fascinating. The "right" answer isn't always obvious so every decision has real weight and the consequences are far more meaningful than the somewhat arbitrary moral choice systems that have become popular in many action games. Here, choice isn't a gimmick. There's usually more than one way to proceed and many puzzles can be completely bypassed if you do a little exploring.

The game's central paint/thinner weapon mechanic underscores the entire system. Paint is a constructive material that makes platforms and structures miraculously appear, while thinner is the destructive counterpart that makes things disappear. You'll need to use both to navigate the environments, as paint can create paths to out-of-reach areas and thinner can expose the dozens of hidden nooks and crannies scattered throughout the game.

The combat mechanics feed into that duality. Spraying evil Ink Blots with paint will convert them to your cause, while thinner unmakes anything it touches, a bit like the anti-toon material from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.

Of course, *Epic Mickey* is a platformer, not an RPG, so there's no character customization and everything takes place within a largely linear framework. Even so, *Epic Mickey* can still surprise you after more than fifteen hours of play, and you won't see everything during a single run.

As good as the level design may be, *Epic Mickey* stumbles with some of the more mundane aspects of development. The game isn't always "fun" as much as it is "interesting," and there are some serious technical shortcomings that may deter many players.

The biggest problem is the unfriendly camera, which seldom captures anything you'd like to look at. It's impossible to focus on enemies during a skirmish and standing near a ledge or a building will draw the camera in tight so that you can't see anything at all. You'll have to make way too many blind jumps and contend with a less-than-ideal view of the proceedings.

The imprecise paint/thinner mechanic similarly leaves something to be desired. Holding the Wii cursor over your intended target is no guarantee that you'll hit whatever it is you're aiming at and thinner is often a bit more effective than paint. One touch will erase the floor you're standing on, but you can't make anything reappear until you move out of the way.

Combat – and even some of the platforming – can also be a bit of a nuisance. Your recovery time after injury is agonizingly slow, so it's way too easy to get stuck in damage loops where you'll get hit four or five times in rapid succession.

Finally, the nature of the game – namely, the fact that literally any wall or tree could be housing hidden compartments – makes it easy to overlook many of the details, and the nearly complete lack of clues can make for some extremely frustrating scavenger hunts. Trying to finish side quests can be a needlessly time-consuming challenge.

Yet despite the flaws, I'm left with an overwhelmingly favorable impression. There's so much going on (it even defies description) that the game is inevitably engaging and never boring, as if Junction Point is running a clinic on conceptual design, and the mediocre execution isn't enough to cloud the outstanding presentation.

Unfortunately, that's a largely subjective opinion and the lack of an obvious audience makes *Epic Mickey* a tough game to recommend. Not everyone is as much of a Disney-phile as I am and younger children (or casual players) may not care about some of the subtler aspects of the design. It's worth a look if you're into game development, but it is a hardcore title and it's probably not for everybody.

It is, however, a worthy addition to the storied careers of both Walt Disney and Warren Spector, you should definitely give the game a chance. You won't play anything else like *Epic Mickey* this holiday season, and that alone should warrant your attention.

# INFINITY BLADE

**SYSTEM:** IPHONE
**PUBLISHER:** EPIC
**DEVELOPER:** CHAIR
**GENRE:** FIGHTING
**ESRB RATING:** N/A
**REVIEW BY:** JUSTIN AMIRKHANI
**85**

A lonely castle, a faceless warrior, and a corrupt God King to dethrone; Despite its diminutive package, *Infinity Blade* is a haunting scene of radiant beauty and despair.

Players take on the role of a nameless, faceless warrior in pursuit of The God King, an equally faceless tyrant that killed your father. On your quest of vengeance you must vanquish The God King's guards and defeat him so your father's spirit may finally be at rest.

There's only one caveat; starting the game you are nowhere near powerful enough to kill The God King. Even by the time you clear out his arsenal of guards, you won't be prepared. So, you die.

The God King kills you, like he killed your father, and like he will kill your son that follows you. The game flashes forward 20 years after each death, offering players the opportunity to assault the castle once more as a descendant of your previous character. With experience points and equipment passed down through the line, the collective might of several generations will finally be enough to tackle the malevolent ruler.

It's a very unique approach to death in games, unlike anything before it. It's also a concept that works fantastically well on the iPhone. Providing players with a shorter overall campaign, but requiring them to replay it several times provides a sense of boundary to the playtime without sacrificing the sensation of progress.

Gameplay is also remarkably deep. Making full use of the iPhone's touch interface, *Infinity Blade* features sword-combat that handles like a game of Simon Says prompting players to swipe or tap to dodge or swing but never feels so one-dimensional. There's fluidity to the motion that always feels lively and intense. Some of the canned animations can get a little repetitive, but the process of anticipating your enemy's action and responding promptly never feels old.

As players progress through the worn castle they'll find equipment and gold to upgrade their character, slowly making them more powerful and priming them for The God King. The equipment also provides additional experience points for mastering the items, meaning that players who use a variety of weapons will earn more than those who stick with just their most powerful.

Of course, the highlight of *Infinity Blade* is the incredible graphical showcase that rivals some current generation console games. Complete with pixel shaders and detailed bump mapping every detail from the characters' armour to their grotesque scarred flesh is produced incredibly vividly.

The environments also look phenomenal, and not just for a mobile device. The high-arched gothic architecture full of twisted pillars and towering effigies contribute to the game's tone of heroism and solitude. The Unreal Engine 3 does some incredible work compressing all of these intense visuals in to a mere 331 MB download and works some voodoo to pull every bit of processing power out of the iPhone.

To make things even more miraculous, *Infinity Blade* pauses the action when exited for multi-tasking and doesn't slow down the system at all. Battery may drain slightly faster, but the overall performance of the device is not compromised by running the game.

In addition to being a technical marvel, *Infinity Blade* is a worthwhile mobile game. Those looking for more out of their iPhone gaming can certainly look to *Infinity Blade* as an answer. The game packs an incredible graphical punch, superior to anything on the PSP or DS, and being designed for limited play sessions the game works fantastically on the go. *Infinity Blade* may be the first generation of a new wave in mobile gaming, but it's an incredible head start.

# RAGE HD

**SYSTEM:** IPHONE
**PUBLISHER:** Bethesda
**DEVELOPER:** ID
**GENRE:** SHOOTER
**ESRB RATING:** N/A
**REVIEW BY:** JUSTIN AMIRKHANI
**70**

As gamers we've shot our fair share of mutant freaks. From the wastelands in *Fallout* to the streets of *Left 4 Dead*, if there's one thing we're good at it's taking out grotesque humanoids. Now, with the power of id Software's brand new mobile gaming engine, we're able to continue our freak genocide on the go.

*Rage HD* is the first game to use id Tech 5 for a mobile platform. Packing all the visual splendor of a console shooter in to a convenient bite-sized package, *Rage HD* looks like no iPhone game before it. Environments within the 3 uniquely designed stages offer an incredible level of detail and feel well lived-in from all the debris and junk that clutters the space.

Though the few enemy character models repeat themselves with alarming frequency they too look surprisingly good. From their tattered rags to their sickly coloured flesh, the mutant freaks of *Rage HD* look the part.

At its heart, *Rage HD* is an on-rails shooter. Players maneuver around a predetermined course, blasting everything in their path and collecting power-ups on the way. Enemies will lunge at the screen or throw debris with the player's only defense being to shoot their assailant down, or use a side-step ability to dodge the blow.

The game offers two basic control options; a touch-based navigation control and a motion sensitive option. Surprisingly, the motion-control option actually works better than the on-screen buttons that clutter the screen with the touch-sensitive choice. Players simply need to tilt the phone in the direction they want to look and the camera moves thusly.

It works surprisingly well, but mostly because of the fixed route the on-rails shooter offers. There is some weirdness when the game's camera is in motion as the player walks between rooms, competing with player control, but overall the experience is near flawless. With a little practice it becomes very easy to peg even small targets at a distance.

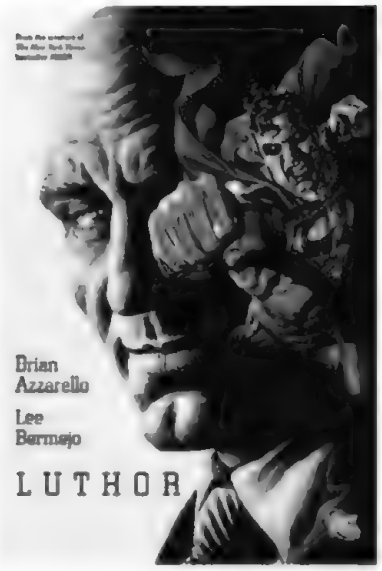
Though the game only features 3 levels there's tons of replay value in the experience because ultimately this isn't a campaign-focused shooter. Players pop in and out of combat scenarios, much like they would a simpler mobile shooter. The only difference with *Rage HD* is that it looks and feels like a more complex FPS which makes the entire affair more enjoyable.

If the game has one major drawback it's that it's a hefty download. Weighing in at almost a full gigabyte you need to be sure *Rage HD* is something you're willing to keep around. It's understandable why it's such a big game, all those textures take up room, but it would be nice to have the option to download levels piecemeal for those who don't want to eat a large portion of their phone's memory.

The game also seems to be a bit of a resource hog. It won't slow down the iOS when idling in multi-tasking, but it will eat the battery like a fat kid eats cake. With the game paused and the phone idling, half the battery of an iPhone 4 will be whittled away within an hour or so. Of course this is variable pending the usage, settings and wireless connections on but across the board *Rage HD* will drain the system.

*Rage HD* is the first mobile shooter to get it right. It may not be as complex or free-flowing as a traditional FPS game, but the contained experience flourishes as an iPhone game. It's addictive because it's exciting, and it's exciting because it works. The game flows and you feel in the heat of the action the entire time. id Software has released a fantastic test case for both their mobile gaming engine, and the future of iOS gaming.

# LUTHOR



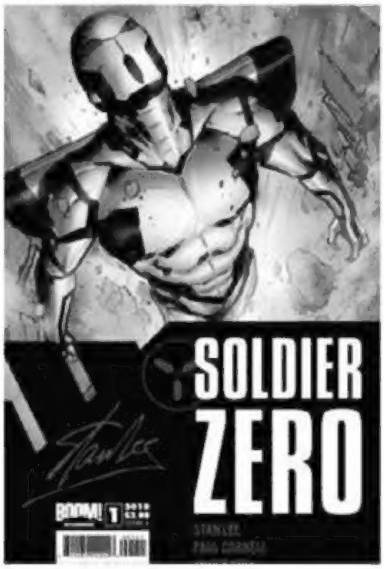

WRITERS: Brian Azzarello
ARTIST: Lee Bermejo
PUBLISHER: DC COMICS
SCORE: 90
REVIEW BY: Rachel Rain Packota

Since the beginning of storytelling, we have been given the tale of the hero. The villain has always placed the champion against the odds before they surmount them all, standing victorious over adversity. We've always been treated with the hero's point of view. But how often have we seen it from the villain's outlook? Enter Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo. This creative duo teamed up in 2005 to bring us *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel*, a five issue mini-series focusing on how Superman's arch nemesis sees things.

Just recently, DC Comics released a hardcover collected edition titled *Luthor*. This book is a delight for any fan. Lex was always portrayed as a megalomaniac bent on destroying Superman and take over the world. He begs to differ. He believes he's doing what's best for mankind's survival. His hero complex is misconstrued. In *Luthor*, we follow Lex, who is the only one in Metropolis unimpressed by the Man of Steel. While everyone is gaga over the superhero, Lex sees him as a threat. Here is a man from another planet and no one's bothered to question that. Bermejo perfectly portrays the hero with fiery red eyes, giving us insight on how Luthor views his enemy: as evil. Writer Azzarello is careful enough not to make Luthor look completely virtuous.

Although in his heart of hearts, Lex genuinely believes he is doing what's best, he doesn't necessarily follow the right path. The writer does a great job with balancing the good and the bad in the man. A cameo by billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne, as well as his alter ego Batman, is a plus. I would suggest this book to anyone interested in seeing Lex Luthor in rare states of caring, compassion, and love. Seems like there's good in all of us.-

# STAN LEE'S SOLIDER ZERO #1




WRITERS: Paul Cornell
ARTIST: Javier Pina
PUBLISHER: BOOM! Studios
SCORE: 65
REVIEW BY: Rachel Rain Packota

Comics legend Stan Lee puts his signature spin on current events by introducing *Soldier Zero*, a super-powered entity inhabiting the body of wheelchair-bound Captain Stewart Trautmann. Heavy-handed and pandering, *Soldier Zero* puts a heroic spin on a Venom-type character with titular cosmic entity taking possession of the partially paralyzed body of Trautmann. What could have been a commentary on the supremacy of mind over physical aptitude in society became an after-school special about equal treatment and an anti-war slant that would make Steven Colbert blush.

Trautmann has returned from service with the USA Armed Forces, but an accident with a mine has left him without the use of his lower limbs. Struggling to negotiate civilian life in wheelchair, he finds himself treated almost exclusively with bias or bigotry. Things seem to be nearing a level of normality as he attempts to woo co-worker Lily when an explosion from the sky drops a mysterious and omnipotent humanoid atop the couple. The being inexplicably merges with Trautmann, sharing his body but dominating his mind, and is determined to use its new physical capabilities to elude the International Military forces closing in.

Most of the story focuses on Trautmann either complaining that others are erroneously feeling sorry for him, or else feeling sorry for himself. He has no guilt association with his role as a soldier and was only "doing his job", yet he denounces his newfound "hero" status and declares he will speak out against arms-bearers at rallies in the future. His brother James is dumbfounded, and no doubt the reader will be, too.

It's a relief to have the inhuman but interesting Soldier Zero crash the party (literally) and take command of the plotline. Watching a strong man in a white-and-red spandex suit run away from government bad guys in far more remarkable and original than a one-dimensional left-winger whining about his lot in life. International conflicts are have complex and ambiguous effects on the lives of veterans returning to civilian existence, and these people deserve far better representation than the caricature of Trautmann.

# HATTER M: MAD WITH WONDER

WRITERS: Frank Beddor and Liz Cavalier
ARTIST: Sami Makonnen
PUBLISHER: AUTOMATIC PICTURES PUBLISHING
SCORE: 80
REVIEW BY: Rachel Rain Packota

Frank Beddor's maddeningly clever *Hatter M* series begins to hit its stride with the second volume *Mad With Wonder* as the title character wanders the New World of America. Branching off from the traditional British perspective, *Hatter M* continues its foray into genre blending storytelling by dropping our Milliner dead centre in the war of the American Civil War.

Caught between the Confederates and the Yankees, Hatter M persists in his search for Alyss through the lawless and dangerous South. Hope glows briefly in the form of Sister Sally, the miraculous healer starring in a traveling carnival. Hatter M is lead to believe he may have at long last found his Princess Alyss, albeit in disguise, but another individual is also drawn to Sally's source of White Imagination: Redd Heart, the diabolical ruling Queen of Wonderland. His battle with her is short and dangerous, and he is lucky to escape Redd's forces with his Hat, let alone his life.

Further in the story, Hatter M is dropped into the infamous, real-life Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum of Weston, West Virginia. He struggles to deal with the smug and abusive authorities of the hospital, but finds unexpected allies in the general patient population, all of which are more than accepting of Hatter M's Wonderland reality.

Beddor gradually moves *Hatter M* from a playful plotline to far darker fantasies in this volume. The familiar violent history of the Civil War is an appropriate background for a character whose true roots are furthered revealed as aggressive and dangerous. His training at the Millinery in Wonderland on the heels of elder brother Dalton discloses a past fraught with good intentions and shady conclusions. He, too, is a soldier and some habits die harder than others.

Artist Sami Makonnen is an excellent choice to succeed Ben Templesmith's helm in the art department. Gloomy, blended pencils and scribbled inks lend an uneven and menacing effect, while washed-out watercolours portray the South as alternately bleak and hostile. *Hatter M: Mad With Wonder* is a step beyond volume one in ambition, and readers will be drooling to get to the next issue before the last page.

# C&G

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